DISRUPTING THE SINGLE STORY: CULTIVATING MORE COMPLETE STORIES ABOUT ACADEMICALLY HIGH PERFORMING YOUNG BLACK MEN

By

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ABSTRACT

DISRUPTING THE SINGLE STORY: CULTIVATING MORE COMPLETE STORIES ABOUT ACADEMICALLY HIGH PERFORMING YOUNG BLACK MEN

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Young Black men are often boxed into severely limited scripts that define what it means to be Black, male and scholarly. This dissertation is concerned with learning how young Black men succeed academically in secondary settings and documenting the substance of Black life. Furthermore, it illuminates the voices of students whose perspectives are often void in research, yet are invaluable in preparing teachers to work more effectively with this population. The four Black male students represented in this study come from a variety of family backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses and school contexts. Disrupting the Single Story: Cultivating More Complete Stories About Academically High Performing Young Black Men is a longitudinal, cross-context, ethnographic case study. In order to investigate the academic performance of the young Black men in study, I employed two primary phases. In *Phase I,* I developed a curricular innovation; it began in a pre-college, residential university-sponsored summer enrichment program, where I was the writing instructor for the student participants. I developed and implemented the writing course curriculum for rising seniors in high school from urban schools, with the following aims in mind: expose students to college level texts about critical theories in education, cultivate college level academic writing, develop scholarly research skills, increase college readiness, and nurture careers in education. In *Phase II,* I followed the young men for one year in their respective high schools, which spanned across three different school districts in the Midwest. Because of my access with the young men *in* and *across* different academic settings, I was able to contextualize ethnographically how the young men constructed, negotiated, and embodied scholarly literacy identities in different spaces. Two crucial findings are (1) metaphors function as a powerful catalyst for unpacking the racialized and gendered literacy identities of the young men and (2) intersectional identities were leveraged to assert agency in their academic and non-academic communities. These findings deepen our understandings about how young Black men are achieving while Black *and* male and they also shed light on ways teachers can recognize, cultivate, and sustain scholarly literacy identities among their Black male students.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Aaronwick, Rajon, Shawn, and Will who have gifted me with new understandings about the significance of Black life.
&
To Cheryl, Ernest, Cherene, and Keaton- It is because of you that I am.

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To God be all the glory!

PREFACE

> At first when we were given the directions and instructions, I was stuck. It took some time for me to find the metaphor. I sat back and thought about my life experiences and what not and all the problems I've avoided to be where I am. I realized how I've never got caught up in any situations I couldn't get myself out of. So I ran with the fishnet idea and it just flowed. I expressed myself and put a portion of my life story on a piece of paper. I didn't really expect for everyone to be emotionally touched by it. But thank you for assigning a 3-page paper because that's the only reason I expressed myself. I've never put these experiences into my work and I want to thank you for that. (Rajon Thompson[1], email communication)

In the *We Choose to Learn* (WCL) pre-college summer writing class in which I was the instructor of rising high school seniors, a 17-year old Black male student, Rajon who was from an urban school district in a Midwestern city, wrote an Artifactual Literacy Education Narrative (referred to as Artifactual LENs or A LENs). He sent this email to me after submitting his 3-page A LENs, which was presented to the class. The purpose of this teacher-generated assignment was to encourage my students (referred to as *scholars* henceforth) to utilize creativity, metaphor, and the skill of narrative to construct initial drafts of their (potential) college admissions essays. Scholars submitted their papers to me electronically via email and I printed a hard copy of each scholar paper for our class presentations.

On each table in our classroom, there were at least three items per scholar. First, there was a hard copy of each scholar's A LENs. Next, there was a plain white sheet of paper with the scholars' name on top. A writing utensil accompanied the sheet. Lastly, there was an artifactual metaphor, a physical object that each student selected (or created). A LENs explained the significance of the scholar-selected, artifactual metaphor. As such, the room was set up like an art gallery. Students were encouraged to move about the room freely to read their fellow scholars' papers, provide words of encouragement on the plain white sheet of paper, and observe the artifactual metaphors provided by each scholar.

As the aforementioned email written by Rajon suggests, his Artifactual LENs touched several people emotionally. At the time of the presentation, several people clustered around Rajon's table station. Some students gave Rajon a physical "pat on the back," others gave him hugs, and others shed tears, including Rajon. In short, it was a *humanizing* (Paris & Winn, 2014) moment that no one could have anticipated that day in class. I will explain below in an excerpt from my "reflective memo" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, 2006; Dyson & Genishi, 2005) how this day unfolded. My reflective memo was written immediately after class that day.

> *The classroom had two separate entrances, one on the northwest end and another on the southeast end of the floor. The entrances to the room were diagonally aligned. I was standing with a group of students at the southeast end of the room when Dr. Johnson*[2] *(pseudonym) arrived around 10:00am. When she came into my classroom, I wanted her to know what was going on since the art gallery formation was not a typical classroom set-up. As such, I maneuvered the room around the various student workstations to get to her in order to orient her to the classroom set-up. It wasn't until I moved close to her that I realized that she was literally crying. She asked me, "where is the scholar?" I sent her Rajon's paper to read the night before class when I invited her to our class presentations. I pointed to Rajon and said he was "the boy in the hoodie at the front of the room sitting on top of the front desk." She immediately put her large black and white suitcase to the side, near the wall, and made a diagonal stride across the room in order to approach Rajon.*
>
> *When she reached him, she grabbed him in a big hug as if her were her own child and spoke into his ear. From my vantage point, I noticed that she hugged him tighter as she held him. They were facing one another and her arms were wrapped around his shoulders- she's a little taller than him. I obviously will never know exactly what she said to him in his ear, but when she let him go I could tell from the look on his face that he was emotionally moved by what she had to say. As such, I also made the diagonal stride across the room to approach Rajon. Dr. Johnson turned to one of the program counselors, Ms. Martin (pseudonym) and told her, "I just can't stop crying" and she wiped her face of tears with the back of her hand while she talked to Ms. Martin.*
>
> *While they talked, I went up to Rajon and grabbed his right arm and kindly guided him outside of the room toward the northwest entrance of the classroom, which is near an adjacent office. When we were completely outside the room, I took him into the office area, which was to the left-hand side of the adjacent office. I told Rajon that he was the student that had me up at 1am in the morning crying as I read through the student papers. I also told him that I really appreciated him for taking a risk with me by putting his personal life out there on paper for our classroom learning community. I emphasized the fact that I knew it was hard to experience what*

he had experienced. Plus, I knew it was probably equally as hard to write about tough topics for a class paper. At that time, he let me know (again for the second time now) that he had never written a three-page paper before. The first time he mentioned this was when I originally assigned the class the project.

I went on to explain to him that after reading his paper, I sent a text to Dr. Wallace (pseudonym), the program coordinator to tell her how the paper moved me personally because it reminded me a lot about my journey as a first-generation college student. Furthermore, I explained that I sent his paper to Dr. Johnson because she has "the power to make things happen." I let him know that I couldn't make any promises, but based on Dr. Johnson's reactions, if he wanted to come to Success Ticket University (STU)[3] that he was pretty much guaranteed admission.

During our conversation in the demo lab, I made it clear that I didn't know what he would have to do to get into other colleges, but I was willing to help him with his writing in the best ways that I knew how. I reminded him that his paper was about "making it out" and if he really wanted to "get out" that he could come to this STU. With a powerful story like his, I said he will "likely be able to go to a good college anywhere." After my comment, Rajon's eyes started to tear up. I looked at him as he held his head down a little. The whole time I spoke up until this moment he was looking me straight in the eye. Therefore, putting his head down was a noticeable physical change in his demeanor. It made me think back to the day in our class when we read David Kirkland's (2012) chapter, Inventing masculinity: Young Black males, literacy, and tears. In class, Rajon mentioned in his written critical reflection (about the chapter) that he doesn't "cry because crying don't change anything." He went on to explain that he "keep[s] crying to minimum."

The silence between us was so loud and for reasons that I still struggle to articulate, I looked away. I turned back to him and gave him a big strong hug and he hugged me tightly as well. He is taller than me and I could hear him in my ear as he cried in the corner of his hoodie's sleeve. I hugged him tighter to let him know that I understood him. After a while, I let him go and then he let me go too. This whole interaction may have been a minute and half of time total, but it seemed much longer than that at the time.

We looked at one another and then I said, "If you need a minute to get yourself together before you come back to the classroom, take as much time as you need." He lifted his head up, looked at me, and asked if he could go to the bathroom. I cracked an involuntary small smile and said "of course."

I didn't mention it to him at the time, but I thought to myself that it was very strange that he still felt like he needed to "ask" for permission to go to the bathroom, especially after the humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2014) interaction we just had.

I wondered about the significance of his question in the grand scheme of things. I am his teacher and clearly he saw me as an authority figure. At the same time, he saw me as someone he could be vulnerable with in his writing and with his tears- something he made explicit as not being something he shed often. Anyway, I told him to "go ahead" and I stood there and watched him leave the room as I pondered my aforementioned thoughts. He went out the front of the adjacent office door. I think it is significant to note that route was a roundabout way of getting to the boys restroom; he could have just cut through the classroom, but he didn't. If he had traveled the shortest route to the restroom, this would have meant going back through the room where all of the scholars (classmates), counselors, and Dr. Johnson was located.

> *I took a moment to gather myself and I went back into the room. Once I entered the room I continued to take pictures and listen to the other scholars' conversations about their work as they described it to their fellow scholars. (Excerpt from Sakeena's field notes)*

Rajon and I had our first formal interview after his Artifactual LENs project[4] was submitted to me. When I asked him to explain the content of his A LENs paper he said, "Basically, it's about, uh, me hating the fact that I had to grow up how I grew up. I was struggling basically having to get everything for myself a majority of the time."

By now, as a reader, I hope that you are interested in reading excerpts from the A LENs projects. Therefore, please find the introduction to Rajon's A LENs essay.

> *Relatives and close friends all tell me their stories and where they went wrong in their school situations and not to follow the route they went. Their words of encouragement don't really motivate me. Their lifestyles motivate me to succeed… I refuse to be part of that statistic. I refuse to live up to the stereotypes… Education means everything to me and if I was to lose it I would be lost…"* (Excerpt from Artifactual LENs: "Don't Get Caught Up in Life" by Rajon Thompson).

In addition to the 3-page Artifactual LENs, each scholar presented an artifactual metaphor to represent the origin of his story. To go along with Rajon's Artifactual LENs, "Don't Get Caught Up In Life," Rajon chose to use a picture of Marlin, an overprotective father from the Disney Pixar film *Finding Nemo* (Stanton & Unkrich, 2003). In Rajon's picture, Marlin is on one side of a large fishnet, while the members from his hometown (Great Barrier Reef) are featured on the opposite side of the fishnet. The fishnet symbolized the physical separation that Marlin had to undergo in order to pursue the thing he desired the most. Marlin informed the community members that he needed to leave their hometown in order to search for Nemo (his son), who was abducted. In the movie, Marlin had reason to believe that Nemo had been taken to Sydney, Australia. As Marlin left the community, there was no way for him to anticipate the journey ahead of him. However, his love for his son motivated him to endure the unforeseen risks until he successfully brought Nemo home.

In the introduction to Rajon's Artifactual LENs, Rajon described how his close family members and friends tried to motivate him to succeed through their stories of struggle. However, when he reflected about his personal struggles with growing up in a single parent, low-income household in an urban community and how he intentionally avoided all of the temptations to get "fast money" by selling drugs or participating in gang activities, he realized that their stories did not motivate him to be an academically high performing student. Rather, he was motivated to succeed because of his adamant refusal to be another "statistic."

Rajon commented in our initial formal interview that he knew that society has "low expectations" for young Black men. As such, he "refuse[d] to live up to the stereotypes" that people have for young Black men. He also cited research literature in his paper from Gary Orfield (1996) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) about disparities in funding, high school graduation and dropout rates to make the argument, "Just because the value of my education means less to the world doesn't mean it means less to me. Education is the most valuable thing that I have possession of and that's all that matters" (Rajon, 2013). In other words, he purposefully chose to be an academically high performing Black male student. In this way, Rajon deliberately disrupted "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009) of common deficit tropes about young Black men from urban contexts as violent, lackadaisical, illiterate, non-scholarly or "unsalvageable" (Ferguson, 2001). Rajon actively owned his agency in refusing society's low expectations for young Black men.

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[1] Rajon Thompson is a student-selected pseudonym of one of my research participants (p. xii)

[2] Dr. Johnson was the director of the We Chose to Learn (WCL) academic enrichment summer program (p. xiii)

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[3] Success Ticket University (STU) is a pseudonym (p. xiv).
[4] The Artifactual LENs project is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 (p. xv).

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

A LENs (Artifactual Literacy Education Narrative)

Success Ticket University (STU)

We Choose To Learn (WLC)

Young Writer's Club (YWC)

CHAPTER 1: “Black Males Face More Barriers To Achievement Than Other Students” (The Problem)

> *Black males face more barriers to achievement than other racial and gender groups- they are profiled, negatively stereotyped, and feared because of the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Black males historically and in the media. Those Black males who have managed to achieve academic success have, more than likely, had to overcome a number of obstacles (Henfield, 2012, p. 217).*

According to Malik Henfield (2012) there are “cumulative risks” for being Black *and* male. Mark Anthony Neal (2013), argues the most “legible” Black male bodies are often rendered as criminal bodies in need of policing and containment. As such, young Black men are often boxed into severely limited scripts that define what it means to be Black, male, and scholarly. More specifically, many doubt the (academic) abilities of academically high performing Black man and they are often perceived as an anomaly (Ferguson, 2001; Henfield, 2012; Kirkland, 2012; Whiting, 2009b). This notion of the Black male scholar as an “anomaly” or “exceptional” is deeply problematic and motivates my research. This dissertation is about disrupting “single stories” (Adichie, 2009) and the “Same Old Stories” (Brown, 2011) that people have about young Black men and complicating notions that we have about the identities of these young men. Therefore, I use literacy to investigate critically the ways academically successful Black male students navigate academic spaces. In this way, my research (1) investigates the racialized and gendered literacy experiences of Black males and (2) cultivates authoring opportunities for these students, thereby illuminating the voices of students whose perspectives are often void in research, yet are invaluable in preparing teachers to work more effectively with this population.

When examining research about young Black men, several scholars note there must be serious cares, cautions, and considerations for the "intersectional" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) identities of Black men as simultaneously raced and gendered beings (Chandler, 2011; Ferguson, 2001; Henfield, 2012; Howard & Flennaugh, 2011; Kirkland, 2012; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Majors & Mancini Billson, 1993; Neal, 2013; Whiting, 2009a, 2009b) because being black *and* male is a unique complex identity that has real consequences for the ways young Black men perceive and are perceived by society. For clarity, scholars warn against attempts to do empirical work about young Black men that does not equally consider race *and* gender. That is, neither identity can be understood in isolation of the other because Black masculinity is perceived differently than is White masculinity, Asian masculinity or other racial and ethnic masculinities. Therefore, to not carefully consider this layered and intersectional identity would be irresponsible.

Black men (like any other race or gender group) want to be successful. Therefore, Henfield (2012) argues Black men need empathy, compassion, and support to resist negative portrayals of young Black men and stay focused on meeting their goals. While most empirical studies tend to amplify how young Black men fail in schools (Harper, 2010), my research examines the racialized and gendered experiences of academically high performing young Black men from urban and suburban contexts. My research is deliberate about adding to the body of literature that recognizes the assets among young Black men, particularly in education and literacy research. Because of this unapologetic stance, I am intentional about leading this dissertation with a narrative of an academically high performing young Black man from one of my classes. We rarely hear *from* Black men *about* Black men (Howard, 2008). Therefore, hearing an excerpt from Rajon's narrative provides a more complete "portrait" (Lawrence

Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Tieken, 2013) about a young Black man in school. This deliberate move also attempts to humanize education research with and about young Black men.

By leading with a narrative I am also *choosing* not to lead with deficit orientations and statistics about young Black men. This does not mean that I am unaware or disregard the many problematic issues about young Black men in this country. To the contrary, it is because of the disturbing statistics about young Black men that I am motivated to understand what is actually *working* with and among academically high performing young Black men in academic settings. Writing in this way, serves as my "refusal" (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, 2014b) to engage in the academy's fascination and manipulation of "damage-centered… narratives of pain" (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, p. 227).

Equally as important, I want to acknowledge that there are young Black men who exhibit high academic performance in urban classrooms on purpose: they believe they are acting within their individualized agency to construct, negotiate, and embody better lives for themselves. The "voices" of these young men are often unheard and it is my intention to provide a platform for those voices to be heard. Because we rarely hear from these young men through empirical research, their voices sometimes are doubted and questioned. That is, people (including Black people) question whether it is true that academically high performing young Black men actually exist. Further, the young men that I work with reject the notion of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) just because they deliberately choose to succeed in school. In fact, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard III (2003) in *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students* argue that to be academically high achieving scholars is an essential and deeply embedded aspect of Black history and culture. Because of the abundance of empirical research and negative popular perceptions that emphasize barriers for high academic achievement among young Black men, this study sought to understand, describe, and interpret "scholar identities" (Whiting, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b) among and between academically high performing young Black men. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In short, "scholar identities" explore both high academic performance *and* the attitudes associated with that performance among young Black men. Entering into this research with "scholar identities" provided a useful framework for which to understand the young men. As I spent more time "listening" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) to the young men in this study, I believe there were three primary types of stories the young men wanted to share (1) (de)humanizing stories, (2) meritocratic stories and myths, and (3) refusal stories. I believe these themes were present in all of the young men's writings, formal interviews, informal conversations, observations and other interactions. The scholars discussed these stories in different ways and I attempt to capture those stories throughout my dissertation. It is my understanding these stories manifested themselves in at least two different ways: through literacy (Chapter 5) and intersectional identities (Chapter 6). Overall, my research makes a deliberate shift away from deficit to anti-deficit orientated research, thereby filling a knowledge gap while also disrupting the single story.

The Current Study

My study is a longitudinal, cross-context critical ethnographic multiple-case study. The study began in a summer pre-college education recruitment program at Success Ticket University (STU) with a total of 20 co-ed rising senior high school students from nearby urban communities, including Northwood, Urbantown and Quahog. *We Choose to Learn* (WCL) primarily hosts scholars of color; most scholars are Black and a few are Hispanic. All scholars who participated in this pre-college summer program had at least 3.0 - 4.0 grade point averages (GPA) on a 4.0 scale in their respective high schools. Many of the scholars who participated in

WCL come from some of our country's top ranked high schools. As such, all of the scholars (males and females) who participated in the summer program were already academically high performing students before my interactions with them. Their GPA's are how I operationalize the concept of "academically high performing." Through using a critical ethnographic case study qualitative inquiry, I will explain how the concept of "academically high performance" can and should be nuanced.

Scholars who participated in WCL were not bound within any particular socioeconomic class. That is, some of the scholars came from low-income, single-parent homes while others came from middle class, dual-parent families. Regardless of the scholar's family background, all of the scholars who participated in the summer program had *all* of their tuition and related fees covered by the university. Their expenses included travel to and from the summer program; room and board fees; three meals a day and snacks; all school supplies (such as books, articles, pens, paper, dictionaries, a book bag, and access to a university laptop with wireless internet services); field trips; and any other expenses that came up during the course of the summer program. Scholars' healthcare was also covered for the duration of the summer program under the auspice of the STU. I find it important to spend time describing the items covered in the summer program because financial stress about school is a hallmark trait of many students who attend schools, especially in urban school districts.

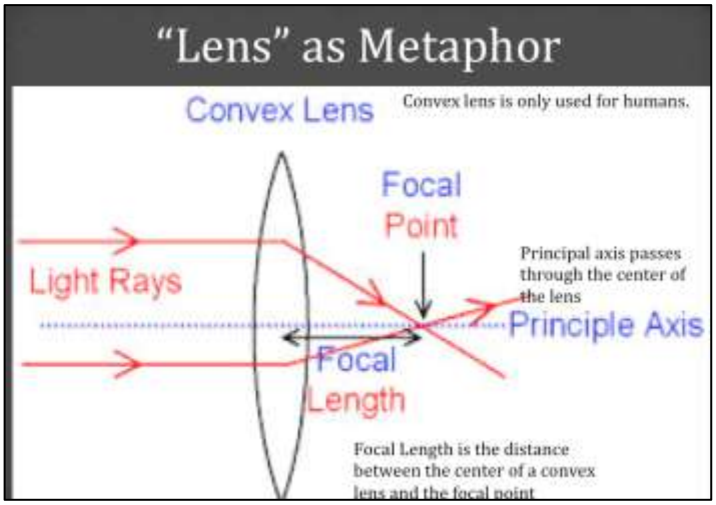
As participants in the WCL program, the scholars were housed in STU's residence halls for approximately four weeks. In WCL, the students took four academic classes; they taught elementary students at a local elementary school; and they participated in various social, academic, and professional development enrichment activities. The four academic classes the scholars took in the summer program were (A) writing, (B) critical examination of urban education, (C) college preparation, and (D) educational leadership. All of the academic course instructors in WCL identified as Black. The instructor for class A was a Black female (me). The instructor for class B was a Black male. The same instructor, a Black female, taught courses C and D. The director of WCL was a Black female.

Among the 20 scholars registered for the summer program, 16 of the scholars identified as Black and four of the scholars identified as Mexican. Among the Black scholars, there were a total of four male scholars. I asked all four Black male students to participate in this research project and all four scholars willingly agreed to participate in this study. In my initial contact with the scholars about this research, I was open and honest about wanting to engage in a research project that documented and analyzed the writing and educational experiences of academically high performing young Black men. This is significant because of my stance as a humanizing researcher. Humanizing research is about acknowledging and creating experiences for both participants and researchers that are “mutually beneficial” (Irizarry & Brown, 2014) and helps each of us to be/become more fully human. Therefore, I had candid, open conversations with the young men about school, life expectations etc. from the outset of our relationship. I referred to them as “scholars” (as did all of the staff and students in WCL). I expected them to be scholars and treated them like such.

During our time in WCL, I spent most of my days with the students, even when they were not in my writing class. Outside of my writing class, I observed them in other classrooms (a) as students and (b) as teachers. I also attended social field trips, professional development, and academic enrichment activities. The environment of the larger pre-college WCL program, as well as my classroom, demonstrated a commitment to providing our *scholars* with rigorous academic work and enriching social experiences.

As a writing instructor in the WCL summer program, I was particularly interested in literacy as a powerful way of seeing "scholar identities" (Whiting, 2006a, 2006b, 2009b) among my students. According to Kinloch (2010) writing is a medium through which students can learn to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question values, establish points of view and reflect on beliefs that may contradict other people's beliefs (p. 44). In my work, (artifactual) literacy functions as a lens or a way to understand the meaning-making processes and variations of embodiment of scholar identities among academically high performing young Black men. Literacy is particularly fascinating to me because of the many ways literacy (and literacies) have been used over time to liberate and marginalize people of color.

In my time with the scholars, I have come to utilize metaphor as a way of capturing our learning. I offer Artifactual Literacy Education Narratives or A LENs for its double meaning as a metaphor.


"Lens" as Metaphor

Convex lens is only used for humans.

Principal axis passes through the center of the lens

Focal Length is the distance between the center of a convex lens and the focal point

Figure 1.1 "Lens" as Metaphor Methodological Framework

The scholars indeed wrote Artifactual Literacy Education Narratives (A LENs) while in my writing class in the WCL. At the same time, these writings, their actual artifacts from the WCL writing class and subsequent interviews provide “a lens” through which to understand their lived experiences as complex humans who are “negatively profiled and stereotyped” (Henfield, 2012), especially in their schools and communities. Like a corrective eyeglass or contact lens, their stories are illuminated in this dissertation to “correct,” de-center and disrupt “single stories” (Adichie, 2009) or the “same old stories” (Brown, 2011) about young Black men- from their perspectives.

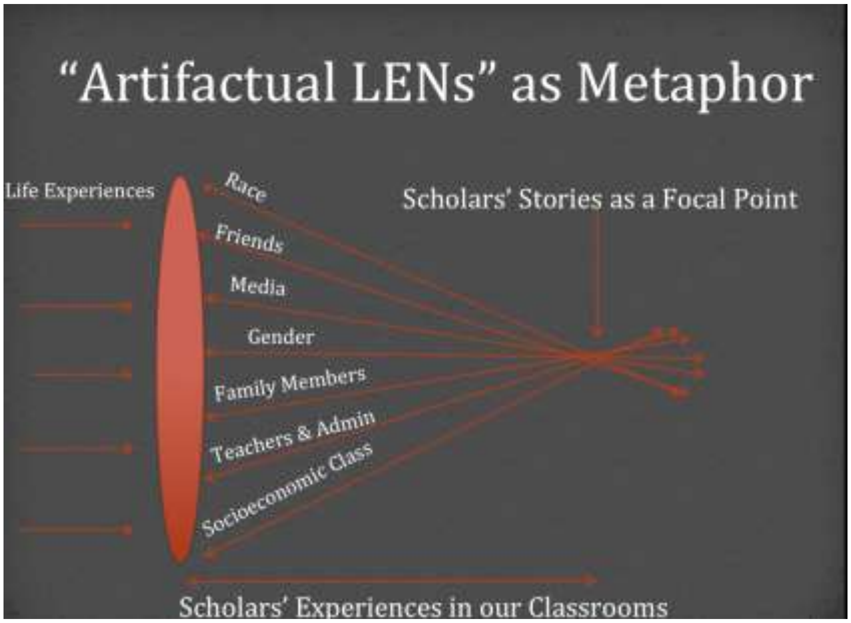

“Artifactual LENs” as Metaphor
Life Experiences
Race
Friends
Media
Gender
Family Members
Teachers & Admin
Socioeconomic Class
Scholars’ Stories as a Focal Point
Scholars’ Experiences in our Classrooms

Figure 1.2 “Artifactual LENs” as Metaphor Methodological Framework

Their stories then become the “focal point.” The “focal point” in a corrective lens is exact location where one’s vision becomes most clear. By listening closely to the Artifactual LENs of the scholars described in this dissertation, we can develop a nuanced understanding of the construction, negotiation and embodiment of their intersectional scholarly identities toward the goal of having a more “correct” vision of what it might mean to be young Black man in today’s schools. Consequently, cultivating more complete stories about young Black men is made possible. Students’ writings and reflections of their writings were examined using a “critical narrative analysis” (Souto-Manning, 2005, 2014a, 2014b) lens that interrogated and critiqued stories about young Black men.

After the WCL’s conclusion in the summer of 2013, I developed meaningful relationships with the scholars beyond the WCL. For example, Rajon had my name saved in his cell phone as “soon to be Dr. E” with a graduation cap emoticon next to it. After a visit to Will’s school, he told me to “text [him] when I get home.” I mention these examples of our interactions simply to note some of the depth and breadth of our relationships and some of the ways we came to know and trust one another as we all pursued higher education. At the time of the submission of this manuscript, all of the scholars were freshmen in college.

Research Questions

In order to use an analytic lens that can account for (a) sociocultural contexts, (b) literacy practices, and (c) scholarly identity development, embodiment, and sustainability- three unique elements that are intricately interwoven, I adopt the conception of PiH. PiH privileges "the co-construction of knowledge, human agency and voice, diverse perspectives, moments of vulnerability and acts of listening" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 23). Occupying such a stance promotes opportunities to learn *with* youth about the complex and dynamic ways they *choose* to perform in academic spaces. Hence, this research deliberately directs attention to young Black men who were consciously deciding to perform academically well in school. An intense investigation here will also shed light on some of the macro level systems, social affordances and restraints and institutional circumstances that influenced the high academic achievement of the young Black men in my study. Through this project, I sought to answer the following questions:

- In what ways might artifactual literacies education narratives (A LENs) function as a catalyst for unpacking the educational experiences of academically high performing young Black men?
- How do these young men (a) construct (define & make sense of), (b) negotiate, and (c) embody scholarly identities as raced and gendered beings?

Significance and Importance of the Study

I worked with the four academically high performing Black male high school students from WCL in order to better understand "scholar identities" (Whiting, 2009b) among the students. There is no shortage of deficient-oriented research about young Black men in schools. To use the words of Rajon, "It's all around. I mean, it ain't too hard to figure out you know, the statistics about Black males." Therefore, I want to engage in empirical research in ways that considers those students who are systematic in their attempts to be academically high achieving students. There is much that we can learn from such students. In this work, I am intentional in telling the scholars' stories using their own voices. Sometimes those voices are in *African American Language* or AAL (Smitherman, 1995; Baker-Bell, 2013). Other times those voices are in *Dominant American English* or DAE (Paris, 2011). I do not specifically take up issues concerning the complexities of language use in this forum. However, I would be remiss to not acknowledge that the scholars and I sometimes speak in our native tongues. I'm unapologetic in my quest to tell each of the scholars' stories throughout the dissertation, especially in each section of the analytic chapters. Centering their voices offers me multiple opportunities to *disrupt* single stories. It also evidences the variance in Black male experiences in academic spaces. That is, their stories are nonlinear, complex and multi-voiced (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014), which illuminates the depth and dynamism of the human experience in more authentic ways. More specifically, I am interested in documenting the substance of *Black lives*, especially those who are academically successful, forward moving and have important stories to tell. We live in a period in the United States of America where anyone with electricity (e.g. a television, computer or handheld mobile device) can access the live uncut raw footage of the deaths of Black men, many of whom are unarmed and die in the hands of those who are supposed to protect and serve them- police officers. At a time filled with undue death and dismal statistics about young Black men, I seek to acknowledge the Black lives of young men who in some ways experience metaphorical deaths in our nation's classrooms, yet manage to maintain hope and achieve academically. At a time in our history when three queer Black women had to create the now global hash tag- #BlackLivesMatter (Garza, 2014) and debate about whether or not Black lives *actually* matter, I am reminded of why I began this work almost a decade ago.

My study has two primary phases: *Phase I* and *Phase II*. *Phase I* began in the summer program (during the four weeks) and *Phase II* followed the young men from the summer program into their respective high schools during the 2013 Fall and 2014 Spring academic semesters of their senior year in high school. These young men have been academically high performing in their respective high schools, which is what made them eligible for admission into the pre-college summer program. In order to gain nuanced understandings of their academic performances in school, the two phases of my dissertation allowed me opportunities to learn from the scholars' various manifestations *across* academic spaces. Examining their academic performance across spaces provided context, evidence, and valuable insights for the construction, negotiation and embodiment of scholar identities. While in the schools in *Phase II* of my study, I observed their classroom interactions, and met with teachers, administrators and family members that played critical roles in the scholars' academic performance. I believed this access helped me to better understand their motivations to be academically high performing students and how they negotiated and navigated the realities associated with being academically high performing Black male students. This work has significant implications for teachers, education researchers and families.

Key Terms

In an effort to provide clarity for some of the concepts I use throughout the dissertation, I define key terms that guide my thinking.

Because we occupy multiple identities simultaneously, it is important to attend to our "intersectionalities" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In my research, it is important to carefully examine the "racialized identities" (Nasir, 2012) of my students. "Racialized identities" signal the underlying assumption of fluidity and the social constructions of racial boundaries (Nasir, 2012; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009). Though I understand race to be socially constructed, I also understand that this construction has very real and often negative consequences for young Black men, particularly in urban schools. Yet, the young men in my study have managed to be academically high performing. In what ways have they made sense of, negotiated, and embodied particular identities even when the odds have been stacked against them?

Black: In my work, I prefer to use the term "Black" with a capital "B" to describe the young men in this study, who were all born in the U.S. However, at times throughout the dissertation you will find this term used interchangeably with "African American." These interchanges occur in order to remain true to and respect the students and scholars that identify with the term "African American."

According to Dyson and Genishi (2005), a *context* refers to “frameworks for interpretation that people bring” to particular experiences (p. 5). “[C]ontext itself is a complex concept, whose meaning is not fixed” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Context can and does refer to both the physical and social frameworks of an individual’s experiences and understandings.

In my work with youth, I deliberately use the term “participant,” as opposed to “subject.” The use of “subject” has roots in positivist scientific inquiry and I find this term to be dehumanizing. “Participant” evokes the collaborative nature of my work *with* youth. It also speaks to the agency that youth have in creating their narratives.

In this chapter, I made intentional moves to discuss the problem at hand, rationale for the study and urgency of the problem I am investigating. That is, young Black men, especially in urban contexts face more barriers to achieve high academic performance. What, if anything, can we learn from these young men who have managed to perform academically well in (sub)urban contexts? In the following chapters, I offer an in-depth review of literature that illustrates the issues concerning young Black men in U.S. schools.

Two crucial findings of my dissertation are (a) metaphors functioned as a powerful catalyst for unpacking the racialized and gendered literacy identities of the young men, especially in spaces where teachers validated such identities (discussed in Chapter 5), (b) intersectional identities were leveraged to assert agency in their academic and non-academic communities (discussed in Chapter 6). These findings deepen our understandings about Black male youth’s literacy practices and they shed light on ways teachers can recognize, cultivate, and sustain scholarly literacy identities among their Black male students.

CHAPTER 2: "I've Faced Challenges And I've Overcome Every One So Far" (The Literature Review)

> *How students view themselves as learners is important to consider when trying to promote their achievement and confidence in school…A scholar identity is not just about grades and performance; it also is about attitudes regarding school and achievement and the decisions students make*
> (Whiting, 2009b, p. 54).

This chapter is titled after a quote from Rajon's interview, "I've faced challenges and I've overcome every one so far." In this chapter, I provide a review of literature, which is organized into bins. Those bins are: (1) Black men in U.S. schools, (2) academic and scholar identities, and (3) literacy. These three bins were selected because they address three complex, overlapping intersections of my research interests. As such, it is my intent in this chapter to paint a vivid picture of the current state of Black men in U.S. schools. Laying this foundation affords me the opportunity to articulate the urgency in exploring scholar identities among young Black men in U.S. schools. It is plausible for the knowledge generated and implications of my research to be applied broadly across content areas. However, it is my Positionality as an English educator that guides me in intentionally grounding this literature review within the context of literacy education research. Hence, the third bin directly addresses literacy.

This review of literature was intentional in its specific attention given to empirical and conceptual research studies in education about Black youth, especially Black men in urban contexts. As such, the research reviewed here took place in schools/school settings. These studies were selected because of their sensitivity in addressing stigmas and/or punishments attached to being Black *and* male in U.S. I privileged those studies that recognized the complex nexus of race and gender for Black men in education. After my systematic identification and analysis of the available relevant literature, I situated my study within the aforementioned discourses concerning academically high performing Black men. In this way, I establish how my study addresses a gap in the existing literature about academically high performing Black men. Lastly, I demonstrate my rationale for choosing "scholar identities" as a conceptual framework for my study.

Young Black Men in U.S. Schools

According to the 2010 U. S. Census Data, the top five cities where Black people live are: (1) New York, NY, (2) Chicago, IL, (3) Philadelphia, PA, (4) Detroit, MI, and (5) Houston, TX. This is also where most Black men in the U.S. live and go to school. Notice that these are among our nation's largest urban metropolises. "[F]or many youth of color, particularly those attending high-poverty urban schools, schooling has also served a social reproductive function, often doing more to stratify society based on race and class than to ameliorate group-based inequities" (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 63). In other words, many Black youth who attend public schools in large urban school districts receive inadequate educational opportunities. If *all* schools assumed that *all* students were deserving of a college bound curriculum regardless of his or her socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious or other identity markers, then education would serve as a "great equalizer" (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Irizarry & Brown, 2014). Every public school in the U.S. should offer a college bound curriculum (Toldson & Lewis, 2013). However, those of us who come from, work in, and go to battle for students in urban schools, are most familiar with a different story about the educational opportunities in urban contexts. That is, there is an accepted culture of failure in the urban schools, which educate most of our nation's Black students.

There is an accepted culture of failure in "urban schools and urban school systems" (Payne, 2008). The culture of failure is accepted because the grim statistics about urban schools are well known; yet the problems are allowed to persist. Charles Payne (2008) describes how urban schools are overwhelmed with educational policies that are disconnected from the real needs of urban schools. The reality is that approximately 84% of Black public school students are in states that require a high stakes high school graduation test (Toldson & Lewis, 2013). At the same time, these students attend schools where they are 70% more likely to have a core content teacher (math, English, social studies, and science) who is *not* certified to teach in the core content subject area (Toldson & Lewis, 2013). To make matters worse, urban schools are often plagued with the highest attrition rates of teachers, elevated dropout rates, underfunding, and lack of contemporary technologies, emergency administration leadership, and large proportions of novice teachers. Also a large proportion of teachers in urban classrooms are white, monolingual middle class females (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Milner, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This often creates racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic differences between students and teachers in ways that often disadvantage young Black men.

According to Payne (2008), there is an overreliance on test scores in urban schools. Further, he notes this is particularly problematic because tests do not reflect the whole child and tests do not tell us what we need to know about children in order to help them learn. Instead, high stakes exams only serve as a proxy for actual learning, Payne asserts. Plus, high stakes exams encourage narrow teaching that ultimately decontextualizes the subject matter and the overall learning process. Decontextualized learning makes students see little value or connections between school and their lives (Gutierrez, 2008, 2011; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Therefore an examination of young Black men in urban contexts is grounded and warranted.

Howard and Flennaugh (2011) theorize Black men continue to be one of the most academically marginalized groups of students in U.S. schools. Further, there is no shortage of dismal statistics about young Black men in schools. According to *The Urgency of Now* Report, 52% of young Black men in the U.S. graduated from high school in the 2009/2010 academic school year (Schott Foundation, 2012). The same report also notes the 2009/2010-graduation cohort was the first cohort that had more than 50% of its students to receive a high school diploma within four years. Approximately 49% of Black men in 2011 in grades 6-12 were suspended from school (Harper & Associates, 2014). When young Black men do manage to navigate the educational system, they are still very likely to be locked out of the nation's (1) early childhood education, 2) student centered learning, 3) well-resourced community schools, 4) gifted/talented and advanced placement opportunities and 5) post-secondary attainment opportunities (Schott Foundation, 2012). It is also important to note males account for 80% of all suicides among Black youth (Joe, 2006). Black men in U.S. schools have been historically, culturally, socially, and academically marginalized.

Malik Henfield (2012) asserts there are "cumulative risks" for being Black *and* male, which emphasizes Black males' perceived inability to succeed in schools. Young Black men in America know that society often typecasts them as 'antithetical to school.' Therefore, schools are often "high-risk environments" (Henfield, 2012) and young Black men often experience schools as "uncaring and unjust spaces" (Howard, 2008; Howard & Flennaugh, 2011). In the same vein, Alfred Tatum (2005, 2009) argues curricula and educational plans have fallen short of addressing these academic, cultural, emotional, and social needs of young Black men and instruction must have value in these young people's current time and space if it is to attract and sustain their attention. Similarly, according to David Kirkland, young Black men are often "forced to endure classrooms constructed in opposition to who they are, have been, and hope to be" (Kirkland, 2012). The stress that often accompanies being in an urban school as a young

Black man is detrimental, especially considering the climate concerning high stakes exams in our country. Given the alarming and disconcerting statistics about young Black men in America and its persistence over time, Tyrone Howard (2008) asked an important question, *Who Really Cares*? Further, Howard wrote there is a glaring absence of the research that includes first-hand, detailed, accounts of African American males about the roles that they believe power, race, and racism play in their educational experiences.

Ultimately what is at stake here is that we need to pay particular attention to the ways that young Black men are positioned in schools. Closely examining this complex positioning will enable us to better understand how young Black men come to construct, negotiate, and embody what it means to be a young Black man in today's urban schools. Understanding how young Black men come to conceptualize what it means to be a "BlackMan" (Chandler, 2011) can help teachers who work with young Black men to begin re-imagining classroom instruction in ways that are *culturally sustaining* (Paris, 2012) and affirming for young Black men. Drawing from performativity theory, Kimberly Chandler (2011) helps us to seriously consider the

> …absence of research focusing on diverse performances of Black masculinities as communicative phenomena. As a result the narrow framework for understanding how Black males negotiate performances of gender has moderated our ability to understand their implications, further solidifying their perception as pathological oppositions to white male heteronormativity (p. 55).

Here, Chandler argues there are narrow scripts for Black men and we need more research that carefully considers the ways Black men perform gender as Black men. Being a Black man is a unique identity in itself that should not be considered in opposition to White male heteronormativity. This distinction pushes us toward understanding the need for more diversity in the ways we conceptualize Black male identity performances, particularly in academic settings. In like manner, Kirkland (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012) deliberately has avoided comparing young Black males to nonblack males in deficient ways. Instead, he theorizes about young Black men's literacies and systems of being in ways that honor and affirm their uniqueness as Black men.

The aforementioned research in this section acknowledges, complicates, and extends conversations about young Black men in affirming ways that school and society often fail to do. As such, I am now in a place to ask, how might I challenge, expand, and complicate the ways we talk about young Black men as academic or scholarly? Moreover, how can we re-imagine classroom instruction for young Black men in urban contexts in ways that recognize and cultivate scholar identities?

A Closer Look at Academic and Scholar Identities Among Young Black Men in Schools

> *For the African American male, the elementary context is a time in which capitalizing on gifts and talents is critical, especially if these gifts and talents are going to be harnessed and channeled in positive and rewarding directions* (Bonner & Jennings, 2007).

In this section of the literature review, I explore specific empirical studies that have closely examined the explicit and implicit ways that young Black men's academic (school-oriented) and scholarly (academically high performing) identities are constructed, negotiated, and embodied in school spaces. I have intentionally identified empirical studies that take place in elementary, middle, and high schools as well as in university settings. By doing this, I aim to illustrate a trajectory of young Black men's academic and scholarly identities across K-16 university settings. You will also note the transdisciplinary nature of the studies presented. That is, the studies come from various fields of inquiry, including African American Studies, Gifted Education, Sociology, Educational Anthropology, Critical Race Studies, Urban Education, and Educational Psychology. In short, the exploration of young Black men in schools is an issue of importance *across* disciplinary fields.

Anne Ferguson (2001), a scholar of African American and Women's Studies conducted a three-year ethnographic study at Rosa Parks' elementary school in a large West coast city focused on intervention strategies for the "at-risk" boys in the Partners at Learning Skills (PALS) program. A committee of teachers, administrators, and counselors selected children to participate in the PALS. As a member of PALS, Ferguson had opportunities to interview students and adults (teachers, principals, discipline staff, truant officer, school psychologist, social workers, school janitors, parents) in her efforts to help the school better assess punishment interventions strategies for their students. In her work, she was able to help the school notice patterns about *who* was providing punishment and which students received which type of punishment. Eventually, she focused on 20 Black boys; 10 were "school boys" and 10 were "troublemakers." All of the boys were in either fifth or sixth grade. Because of her concerns about her Positionality as being an older Black female conducting research with young Black males, she decided to work with a 12-year-old student. The student functioned as her key informant and research assistant. One question she sought to answer in the research study was: What does trouble mean for the students? Together, they were able to investigate meanings of punishment through an exploration and recognition of the meaning of school rules and the interpretation of trouble through the youth's perspectives (Ferguson, 2001).

Ferguson (2001) analyzed the interplay between institutional and individual forces facing boys in elementary school. She suggested that cultural sanctions gave life to power and racism in school, produced massive despair, and demonized children (Ferguson, 2001). Therefore, she argues "bad boys" were *created* in schools. Ferguson nuances this point by adding that punishment in school had the power to create, shape, and regulate social identities.

A problematic practice highlighted in her study was the school's labeling practices. The school's labeling practices operated as part of the hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate young Black men. For example, one teacher in the study pointed at a 10-year-old Black student and commented that he was going to 'end up in prison' because he spent so much time in the principal's office. The student had already been criminalized and deemed "unsalvageable" at the age of 10. This label shaped the way teachers and administrators interacted with him. Undoubtedly, this student knew that his school questioned his ability to succeed and/or predicted his seemingly pre-destined failure.

Ferguson notes that labeling elementary age Black boys as either "school boys" or "troublemakers" as different from one another was a huge mistake since their identities were constantly redefined by (1) naturally growing older and (2) by the school they attended, which restricted the types of identities they had access to 'try on.' Plus, the climate of the school was such that at any given time, a "school boy" could become a "bad boy." Consequently, she sought to illuminate the voices of the young men because they were often silenced and invalidated in the school. This silencing and lack of validation is problematic because young Black men provide critical perspectives about educational experiences (Howard, 2008). Without their input on the meanings and functions of punishment in the construction of their developing identities, how could this school or any school adequately cater to the needs of their Black male students? This is a prime example of how schools and curricula fail to meet the needs of young Black men (Tatum, 2005, 2009). In order to get at some of the critical perspectives that young Black men offer in schools, Ferguson asked each student to pose a question about whatever they wanted to know. Through the young Black men's inquiries, Ferguson learned the boys who were labeled as lazy, belligerent, and unsalvageable, could also be respectful, diligent, and responsible in other contexts outside of the classroom. Ferguson's study demonstrates empirically the power institutions have in limiting and promoting certain types of Black masculinities for young Black men in schools.

Fred Bonner (2005) whose research is grounded in Gifted Education, conducted a qualitative study in Connecticut with 63 middle school students in grades 6-8. Approximately 37% percent of those students received free and reduced lunch. As such, a significant proportion of the students came from low-income families. The purpose of his study was to assess the factors that led to successful transitions of giftedness among middle school students (from elementary schools). The findings from his study were categorized into six themes. However, I will only highlight two of those findings for purposes of this literature review.

Bonner learned there were three primary factors that contributed to students' successful transitions into gifted education: (1) self-confidence, (2) intelligence, and (3) determination. According to Bonner's analysis of the findings, these three factors played vital roles in their academic experiences *and* their nonacademic encounters in schools (Bonner, 2005, p. 20). Secondly, he learned that among the students, three primary factors did not contribute to their success: (1) luck, (2) money, and (3) physical attractiveness. The students in his study suggested the random subjective qualities associated with luck, money, and physical attractiveness were factors they lacked control over (Bonner, 2005, p. 21). As such, the students with a strong sense of their personal locus of control were better able to recognize their academic abilities and maintain motivation to pursue their academic goals. According to Bonner, academically gifted students tend to possess positive levels of self-perception and an internal, as opposed to external, locust of control. What Bonner failed to address in this study is *how* those students were able to construct and maintain positive levels of an internal locust of control. Therefore, the question of how scholarly identities are constructed, negotiated, and maintained still needs to be explored.

Several researchers have started to challenge our conceptions of academic achievement, particularly for students of color. Prudence Carter (2005), a Sociology scholar, focused on students' educational, racial, ethnic, and cultural beliefs and practices. Carter (2005) found in her multi-year ethnographic study that both her low-income Black and Latino students had aspirations. However, those students had limited access to and familiarity with dominant resources and the cultural 'know how' to bring those aspirations to fruition. From her analyses of students in Yonkers, NY, she concluded that students fell into one of three categories: "noncompliant believers," "cultural mainstreamers," or "cultural straddlers."

Noncompliant believers believed in education, but they also saw value in their own cultural 'know how.' Sometimes this created home-school dissonance. In other words, these students may not have performed well in school even though they *could* do well, if they chose to do so. Cultural mainstreamers embraced dominant cultural practices, ideologies, and acknowledged their own race, but they also tried to portray a neutral race role. Therefore, these students (1) were able to fully embrace achievement ideologies consistent with school and (2) they also performed well on traditional school/academic tasks while downplaying the importance of their race. Lastly, cultural straddlers were the *cool kids* who also did well in school. They made conscious efforts to hold onto their own cultural codes (demonstrating a positive racial-ethnic identity) *and* they performed academically well in school. In this way, the cultural straddlers' performances in school challenged some scholars who purport that Black students who do well in school feel like they must sacrifice their racial-ethnic identities in order to "act white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). "Acting White" is associated with 'doing well in school.'

When scholars claim that Black students who perform academically well in school must sacrifice their racial-ethnic identity, they completely disregard the long history of Black people in this country who struggled to attain “freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom” (Perry et al., 2003). In other words, being an academically high performing Black student is not and should not be seen as “new,” “exceptional,” or an “anomaly.” While the knowledge shared from Carter’s study is indeed informative and useful for understanding the academic and scholarly performances of Black youth in urban contexts, I challenge the language of “cultural mainstreamer,” which is used to characterize the students who have high racial-ethnic identity and high academic performance. This language does not adequately capture the agency that young Black students actively utilized in constructed, negotiating, and embodying scholarly identities.

Jonathan Gayles is a scholar in African American Studies and Educational Psychology. He studied academic resilience among young Black men in high school. Gayles (2005) in *Playing the game and paying the price: Academic achievement among three high-achieving African American males* characterized academic achievement as a form of *academic resilience*. Academic resilience in the context of his ethnographic, multiple-case study refers to “academic achievement when such achievement is rare for those facing similar circumstances or within a similar sociocultural context” (p. 250). All of the students in his study were among the first to graduate with honors *and* attend college in their families. Yet, these same students diminished the degree to which academic achievement separated them from their peers. More specifically, one student claimed, “I see myself as a person that gets good grades but I’m just like them” (p. 255) “…I don’t act like a smart person and stay home and study…” In this way, this student prevented “academic” as a label for himself. The irony about Gayles’ study is that one could assume that because these young men performed well in school, they enjoyed school and/or they thought of themselves as somehow different from other young Black men. However, the young Black men in his study made it a point to *not* distinguish themselves from their peers, at least not socially and culturally.

For the students in Gayles' (2005) study, grades were something the boys *needed* as opposed to *wanted*. Grades were not connected with any social enjoyment of school or the learning processes involved. In other words, they played the game (of academia), so they could eventually get "paid" in the future. Gayles urges us to pay more attention to the power of practical interpretations of academic achievement for young Black men, rather than think of academic performance as some intrinsic or inherent value. Once again, this study reminds us about the critical value in "*listening closely* to *what* students are saying and *why* they are saying it" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p 26). If we do this, we are able to gleam from Gayles' study that "academic high performance" as a concept needs to be problematized and explored further. Nuancing the why's and how's of the young Black men's narratives provide us with a more complete narrative about the triumphs and challenges of being an academically high performing young Black man. The ways the young men in Gayles' study constructed, negotiated, and embodied scholarly identities were counter-intuitive and very insightful. Gayles suggests advocates for culturally relevant pedagogy need to consider the impact of utilitarian constructions of schooling and academic achievement as a strategy to increase student engagement.

Dorinda Carter Andrews, a Critical Race and African American Studies scholar, points to the conscious "performative act" where students achieve school success as a form of resistance or a 'prove them wrong' approach. Carter Andrews' (2009) research counters dominant discourses that focus on Black underachievement in the U.S. by focusing on Black high achievers who do not feel like they are “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Furthermore, Carter Andrews asserts Black achievers can perform well in school *and* maintain their racial and ethnic identities. School success as a resistance strategy represents a commitment to maintaining historically rooted ideology of ‘racial uplift and thriving against all odds’ (Perry et al., 2003).

In this grounded theory study, Carter Andrews (2009) found that Black achiever identities were not monolithic. Consequently, Black achiever identity constructions may also look different in different contexts. Students in this study were consciously aware of race and racism. Further, the students illuminate an insightful nuance that achievement was a human trait, but the task of acquiring academic achievement in their school setting was racialized. The interrelatedness of race and achievement as part of their student identity highlights contradictions in their discussions of achievement in racial and non-racial terms. In other words, having a Black high-achiever identity while maintaining a positive racial-ethnic self-concept was a complex task with many layers. Carter Andrews argues these students did not maintain school success by simply having a strong self-concept. Indeed, they discussed achieving in the context of being Black or African American. In this way, her student participants valued race as a part of their core concept and expressed positive feelings toward Blacks and members in their own racial group.

In *To be young, gifted, African American, and male*, Bonner (2003) did a phenomenological case study with two students, one attended a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) and the other young man attended a Traditionally White Institution (TWI). In his study, Bonner wanted to learn more about the experiences of Black male students in college who identified as “gifted and talented” in K-12 settings. His findings revealed there were at least six major themes that influenced their educational experiences: (1) relationships with faculty, (2) peer relationships, (3) family influence and support, (4) factors influencing college selection, (5) self perception, and (6) institutional environment. He learned that "[r]egardless of factors such as precollegiate preparedness or intellectual prowess, students at both ends of the academic continuum profit[ed] from meaningful liaisons with faculty" (p. 27). Both students in the study spoke at length about (A) the multifaceted nature of their peer networks and (B) how those relationships were instrumental to them academically, socially, emotionally, and psychosocially, especially since their designation as "high achieving student" sometimes compartmentalized and isolated them from other students. It is also important to note, the young men's family members often played an integral role in the young men's personal decision making processes. When working with young Black men, we need to recognize that students' needs are not solely academic; Black men need to be addressed holistically (Bonner, 2003). This need for Black men in particular to be engaged holistically, regardless if they are academically high or low performing, is consistent *across* the literature in different fields of inquiry. The ways that young Black men are positioned in schools and society demand this level of empathy for our Black male students.

Greg Wiggan (2009), whose work is situated in Urban Education and Sociology, conducted a mixed methods phenomenological study at an urban public university in the south with seven students (six females and one male). All of the students were Black and attended suburban high schools where they maintained 3.0 grade point averages or higher on a 4.0 scale. The purpose of his study was: (1) to explore the experiences of African American students, (2) understand the processes that contributed to the students school success, (3) and to explain the progress students believe was necessary to improve achievement across the nation (Wiggan, 2009).

The findings from Wiggan's (2009) study illustrate that school context and school processes contributed to academically high achieving students' academic success. The findings reveal three main school effects impacting the students' performance: (1) teacher practices, engaging pedagogy versus disengaging pedagogy (2) participation in extracurricular activities and (3) the state scholarship as performance incentive. Wiggan suggests that academic achievement is generally associated with GPA's and test scores. These measures, he asserts, are used to create the "achievement gap"- a narrative that positions white students' average performances against Black students' average performance. What's problematic about the "achievement gap" narrative, Wiggan argues, is that it assumes that white students' performances are acceptable and that whiteness is the norm (p. 318). He takes this point further to illustrate that on a global scale, whites are underperforming when compared to other countries. As such, Wiggan argues for *excellence* as the standard for achievement, rather than racial standards. In this way, Wiggan challenges us to problematize and reframe our understandings of academic performance in schools. By reframing or "widening the lens" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) on the standard of measure, we can presumably author different stories about academic performance.

In *New directions for gifted Black males suffering from bystander effects: A call for upstanders* (2011), Grantham theorizes about why we still continue to see alarming statistics about young men and he calls readers to take action in ways that disrupt the "educational neglect" of young Black men students. Tarek Grantham is a scholar in the fields of Educational Psychology and Gifted Education. In his 2011 article, he takes up the concept of "bystander effects," which he argues is born out of social and experimental psychology studies that have examined people's responses to others in a crisis or emergency situation.

Bystanders are people who do not respond if something bad happens; instead they stand by, watch, or pass by (Grantham, 2011, p. 264). Then he lays out five primary reasons why people engage in bystander effect behavior: (1) self-preservation, (2) perceived inability, (3) situation ambiguity, (4) diffusion of responsibility, and (5) pluralistic ignorance. Next, Grantham explains that these bystander effects negatively impact young Black men in the following ways: (a) people watch intelligent young Black men become over-referred for special education or remain unengaged in class because of culturally biased curriculum, (b) people ignore the aspirations of underprivileged gifted Black men as unrealistic, which later creates long range career barriers, and (c) people allow gifted Black men whose learning styles might be characterized by movement to underachieve because teachers believe that it is not their responsibility to modify their teaching styles to be more culturally relevant. All too often, Grantham argues, people applaud Black men for their athletic and creative talents (i.e. stepping, dancing etc.), but rarely do we engage their intellectual abilities. As such, he challenges teachers, parents, and Black men to become *upstanders*. He defines upstanders as "those who take a stand and engage in proactive roles to address injustices" (p. 267).

According to Grantham (2011), upstanders for gifted Black men can play the following three roles: (1) facilitator, (2) problem solver, and (3) be a communicator. Facilitators bridge gaps between strengths and weaknesses by providing skill and knowledge development. Problem solvers overcome barriers to achievement and employ strategies of motivation and perseverance in spite of crisis. Communicators engage in conversations, entertain questions, and exercise listening skills to effectively understand and respond to crises. He also provides several examples of ways that teachers, parents can concretely engage in upstanders behaviors such as developing cultural competence, acquiring accurate information about Black males, and using the information to support and guide Black males as they matriculate through school. Overall, Grantham's conceptualization charges us to stop consuming deficit orientations about young Black men and take action to change the plight of many young Black men.

Gilman Whiting, a scholar of African American studies, Masculinity Studies, and Gifted Education cofounded what he calls Scholar Identity Institute (SII). In his SII, he worked with 30-70 Black young men from urban contexts in grades 5-10 for two weeks annually. The students in this program ranged from academically low performing (.88 on a 4.0 scale) to academically high performing. Some students were formally identified as gifted and talented and took Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Whiting, 2009b). After his third year in these annual summer institutes, Whiting conducted a case study with one his students, Darnell. Whiting's findings suggest that Darnell was an intelligent young man who did not see himself as a scholar. Subsequently, Darnell chose to underperform, even though he was capable of high academic performance. Whiting points out that scholar identities are not just about grades. Scholar identities are also about attitudes regarding school and achievement and the decisions students make (Whiting, 2009b).

According to Whiting, there are three underlying assumptions about scholar identity among Black males: (a) they are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity, (b) they are more likely to be viewed as possessing the potential for giftedness if they achieve at higher levels, and (c) they are more likely to reach their potential when we hold high expectations of them (Whiting, 2009b, p. 54). In addition to high academic performance, Whiting defines a "scholar identity" as an identity where the individual sees themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent (Whiting, 2006b). Further, Whiting explains there are nine specific traits that make up a scholar identity: (1) self-efficacy, (2) future orientation, (3) willing to make sacrifices, (4) internal locust of control, (5) self-awareness, (6) strong need for achievement, (7) academic self-confidence, (8) race pride, and (9) masculinity. Because of the construction of Whiting's scholar identity model, I am able to extend, complicate, and challenge what counts as "academically high performing." That is, "scholar identities" require two components: (1) high academic performance and (2) effort to see one's self as a scholar. While Whiting's theoretical framework for scholar identities provides valuable language to name some observations about academically high performing young Black men, his work fails to demonstrate how these identities become constructed, explain how they are negotiated, or detail how they are maintained. My study deals specifically with academically high performing young Black men who *choose* to do well in school. Young men like Aaronwick, Rajon, Shawn, and Will embody scholar identities. However, we know very little about how these scholar identities came to be or what allows them to persist. Therefore, using a critical ethnographic case study methodological approach that closely investigates scholar identities among young Black men, like the scholars in my study, is both appropriate and warranted.

In this section, I have established the "cumulative risks" (Henfield, 2012) of being a young Black man in U.S. schools, especially for students in urban contexts. Further, I have laid out several empirical studies across academic disciplines and age groups in ways that demonstrate what we already know about young Black men. Identifying literature systemically in this way, helped to establish the complexities and nuances of investigating academic and scholar identities among young Black men. Now, I will address my particular interests in the sociocultural literacies of young Black men.

Examining Literacy Among Young Black Men

In this section, I offer several definitions of literacy/ies. “Literacy and literacies” (Collins & Blot, 2009) are complex and have long and complicated sociohistorical lineages and varied meanings over time that concern religion, economics, and power. Therefore, I want to highlight some of the scholars who have been influential in the ways that I am coming to know, understand, and teach literacy/ies. I situate my understandings of literacies within and around sociocultural and New Literacy Studies (NLS). Within these realms, there are several subtleties, but they overlap and inform one another in very useful ways. The literacy/ies offered here cater to those students, particularly Black men, who come from urban contexts. The underlying assumption across the definitions is that Black men *are* literate and scholarly in nature. As such, these literacy/ies understandings inform my research, teaching, and epistemological understandings as a humanizing researcher and educator.

Teaching is a social and political act and the roots of "literacy pedagogy [are] …politically polarized" (Cochran-Smith, 2001) and students, as I have demonstrated, are multidimensional beings. In alignment with scholars like Gee (1996), Hill (2009), Kinloch (2010), Mahiri (2008), Paris (2011), I understand literacy as *non-static* and *situated* within social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. As such, I come to this research with the understanding that "literacy mediates identity” (Collins & Blot, 2009). The ways in which we embody and enact literacy practices are intricately interwoven with how we identify ourselves and they are difficult to separate.

American K-12 schools in their current form are failing to meet the needs of young Black men, in part because there are not enough candid conversations about the “cumulative risks” (Henfield, 2012) of being Black *and* male in urban school districts. Subsequently, there are not enough actions taken too seriously address how this intersectional identity influences Black men’s schooling experiences and academic performances. Kinloch (2009) suggests, students should be encouraged to write powerfully about their (dis)connections to multiple arguments, positions, perspectives, and locations of learning (p. 333). Hence, there is a need to create more research documenting “anti-deficit” Harper (2010), non “damage-centered” (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, 2014b), and effective critical approaches/programs that actually work for young Black men. In short, there is a need for a paradigm shift in what counts as learning and literacy education, we need to create a *third space* (Gutierrez, 2008) for young Black men.

Ernest Morrell (2002, 2004) described literacy in two explicit ways: academic literacy and critical literacy. *Academic literacy* refers to the forms of engaging with, producing, and talking about texts that have currency in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. *Critical literacy* (as opposed to academic literacy) is defined as the ability to not only read and write, but also to assess texts in order to understand the relationship between power and domination that underlie and inform texts (Morrell, 2002, 2004).

Morrell (2004) notes that by nearly every statistical measure (dropout rates, standardized test scores, advanced placement exams and college and eligibility indexes), urban students, particularly youth of color, appear to trail behind their suburban counterparts. However, he suggests that intelligent and highly motivated young people are often alienated and disempowered by traditional curricula and pedagogical practices because many urban students have limited exposure to academic language, topics, and themes addressed in academic texts.

Hence, his research critically engages and challenges traditional academic measures of achievement through empowering youth to gain mastery of both academic and critical literacies. In my work with Aaronwick, Shawn, Rajon and Will, they expressed verbally and in writing that reading books like Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* not only motivated them to perform well in school, but it also gave them a language to describe some of his lived experiences.

Jabari Mahiri (2008) subscribes to the *New Literacy Studies* (NLS), which according to scholars like Gee (2008) suggest that literacy integrates a variety of disciplines like linguistics, social theory, anthropology, critical theory, cognitive science, and education to take on the view that language and literacy must be defined as socially, historically, and politically situated practices through people's identities, which are formed and transformed, produced and reproduced (Gee, 1990; Mahiri, 2008). Mahiri (2008) would describe academic achievement for Black students when they are offered opportunities to engage their "power and purpose of imagination" when constructing "street scripts." Furthermore, he asserts knowing our students' particular voices and choices allows us to better understand their anxieties and how they understand their own conditions. This brings us back to the critical value in listening closely to *what* young people are saying and *how* they are saying it (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). We must value youth's texts.

David Kirkland (2011) argues, "youth are not failing to engage in texts; many of the texts we teach in schools are failing to engage youth" (p. 201). Tatum (2009) brings this point home with the claim that it "is not just about literacy development; it is about their lives" (p. 31). More specifically, teachers should teach in ways that understand the seriousness of lives being on the line. As such, Tatum argues that literacy development requires skills and strategies to read texts *and* the material must be mediated and discussed in ways that account for the boys' contextual and life experiences. Tatum assures us that when we engage in "collaborative literacy events" (Tatum, 2009) where young Black men's voices are valued, they have opportunities to examine and define themselves, understand their resiliency, collaborate with others, and build a capacity for change. Later, Tatum and Gue (2012) extended this argument by emphasizing there are sociocultural benefits of writing for Black male students who anchor their writing in a collaborative writing environment that they assess as both engaging and supportive.

Valerie Kinloch (2010) values academic achievement that through writing, allows students the space to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question values, establish points of view, and reflect on beliefs that may contradict other people's beliefs (p. 44). Kinloch (2010) also blends sociocultural and literacy theories to empower two student participants in her study in Harlem, NY. This three-year, systematic action research endeavor was rooted in the lived experiences of youth, which she notes are often absent from the conversations that adults have about community. Her ethnographic study illuminated the power of literacy to create counter narratives of young Black men. In this way, "words are weapons" and writing is a tool, which allow opportunities to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question, values, establish points of view, and reflect on beliefs- shared and contradictory (Kinloch, 2010). The students in her study were able to effectively grapple with a sense of belonging in the midst of change (gentrification) and employ "writing as if their lives depended on it" (p. 45). Kinloch insists teachers need to get to know their students through literacy encounters in the classroom while encouraging them to take responsibility for their literacy lives. This study is very useful in that it provides explicit detail about how to conduct this type of research. It also includes student-writing samples, which illustrate the critical thinking, questioning, and changes in the students during the course of the study.

Kirkland (2009) suggests that Black students, particularly Black men, face academic, social, and political penalties simply for embodying Black language, culture, and identity. These, he claims, position their literacy skills to constantly be questioned by the general public (p. 377). As such, he calls for a reframing of Black men's academic achievement from "underdeveloped" to "under siege." In this way, the humanity of Black men, as opposed to their absence, can be adequately considered.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) argue for a theory of masculine literacies, one that recognizes how a particular group of Black males formed and functioned literate practices. Their research notes that dominant discourses often depict Black men as lacking literacy and this is a position they strictly oppose. Embedded in this theory of Black masculinities is an understanding that individuals and groups communicate by using more than just words and literacy is situated. Hence, when working with young urban Black men, they insist that before we can understand a theory of Black masculine literacies, we must first insist that Black men are literate. Furthermore, they argue Black men are multiply literate as evidenced through their language and style, which is a deviation from the dominant discourse on Black males as barely literate (p. 295). Kirkland and Jackson invite us to consider that "coolness" has two hidden forms of Black masculine literacies that manifest themselves through (1) "cool talk" and (2) "cool dress" (clothes). In their study, they discovered intricate nuances in the complexity of symbolic systems that defied conventional wisdom; it had its own logic (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). For example, cool talk was a cultural code that could help shape black male identities. Students felt like what they wore gave particular messages about who they were; clothes became symbols for composing narrative and critique. Clothes served as an identity text that could not be separated from their physical and social contexts (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

Young (2007) makes this stream of thoughts explicit by noting "we can't ignore the fact that [B]lack men are feared… and are hyperconscious of their gestures and performance” in schools (p.144). In his book, *Your Average Nigga,* Young (2007) discusses some of the tensions Black men contend with in trying to negotiate a balance between being Black enough and being ‘man enough’ as they navigate between home and school settings. Being recognized as *masculine* for Black men is a significant part of Black male identity. Further Young argues, “[s]chools actually teach and breed unmanly performances or, at least, promote white feminine linguistic styles" (p.144) and this undermines a valued part of young Black men’s participation and performance in classrooms. This, Young asserts, is evident in how traditional reading fluency programs in schools like *Hooked on Phonics* and *Reading Naturally* require that all students read texts using audio recordings where they mimic the sound of a white women's audio recorded voice. Young is careful to note, it is *not* problematic that students learn to read using fluency audio readings. However, literacy instruction in schools is often associated with a specific gender and race: white females. Young Black men in schools are highly conscious of this fact, especially since they do not embody the valued gender or race utilized in most literacy instructional tools. Clinical Psychologist Beverly Tatum asserts individuals who occupy subordinate positions are highly aware of the values of those individuals in dominant positions (Tatum, 1997). Unfortunately, the result is that "...boys many times feel left out of literacy instruction. When this happens, they can't learn the skills that would make them the best readers, speakers, and writers they could be if literacy were more diverse" (Young, 2007, p. 144). According to Tatum and Gue (2012), there are sociocultural benefits of writing for Black male students who anchor their writing in a collaborative writing environment that they assess as both engaging and supportive.

It is difficult to be young, Black, and male in today's schools. Young Black men know they are "feared" (Young, 2007). People 'question their intellectual abilities in classrooms' (Ferguson, 2001; Henfield, 2012; Kirkland, 2009). They are often unfairly measured against White (male) heteronormativity (Chandler, 2011; Gayles, 2005; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Often, their ways of learning and ways of being are not valued or taken into account (Ferguson, 2001; Howard, 2008; Young, 2007). Though these issues are well known, these issues are still allowed to persist (Grantham, 2011; Henfield, 2012; Howard, 2008; Payne, 2008). Additionally, young Black men know some of the consequences of being young, Black, and male beyond school infractions as evidenced by the untimely murders of young Black men like Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice and countless others. In short, young Black men's lives are generally not cared for and valued with the same humanity as other racialized and gendered populations. They are certainly not often assumed to be "scholarly."

However, there are young Black men in this country who do perform academically well in general classroom settings in public schools and I have noticed that their "voices" are missing from empirical research. We know much about the issues concerning young Black men, but there is scant empirical research about how to change these realities. We know even less about how scholar identities are cultivated, perceived and maintained by young Black men from the perspectives of young Black men. My research seeks to build on the aforementioned research about young Black men in ways that challenge, extend and perhaps transform the status quo in order to provide more complete stories about academically high performing young Black men.

In her speech, Adichie (2009) described the "danger of a single story," which is created when we "show people as one thing over and over again [until] that is what they become." These *single stories* go on to produce stereotypes about people. She argued that the issue with stereotypes is not that they are incorrect, but it is that stereotypes are incomplete. The aforementioned stories about young Black men as deficient, ill adaptive, failure prone, hyper masculine, and violent are incomplete stories. Unfortunately, these incomplete stories have dominated much education research about young Black men; they have become the master-narrative. The research presented in this dissertation illustrates a "counternarrative" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) about young Black men. In other words, my research aims to provide fair, *humanizing* (Paris & Winn, 2014), affirming, and *culturally sustaining* (Paris, 2012) paradigms for young Black men. According to Paris (2012), *culturally sustaining* efforts seek to perpetuate, foster, and sustain cultural pluralism in the democratic project of schooling. In my work with young Black men from urban contexts, I have adopted this concept in hopes of exemplifying what culturally sustaining pedagogies (research and practices in the resource tradition) might look like in practice in academic settings.

In this chapter, I included a review of literature that was organized into "bins." Hence, I was able to explicitly situate my study within the larger discourses concerning academically high performing young Black men and demonstrate how my study addresses a gap in the existing literature about academically high performing Black men. In chapters three and four, I demonstrate how I critically investigated "scholar identities" by using literacy as a lens as a theoretical framework for entering my study. Reframing the picture about young Black men in ways that actually include young Black men will deepen and widen our understandings about young men in generative and transformative ways. I also demonstrate how examining "scholar identities" presented a useful entry point. Furthermore, I came to discover the scholars also revealed three types of thematic stories that complicated their scholar identities. Understanding *what* informed their (de)humanizing stories, (myths of) meritocracy stories, and refusal stories help us to cultivate more complete stories about young Black men and disrupt single stories about them.

CHAPTER 3: “Changing The Person Who I Was” (Methodological Frameworks)

> *[R]esearch is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).*

Methodological Stance

Ways of entering into historically marginalized communities in the name of “research” have deeply disturbing and disrespectful roots in dehumanizing people. I often wonder about the ways that I am located in research and I also contemplate about the ways I am implicated because of my research. Undoubtedly, I carry out the roles and responsibilities of a researcher in methodologically competent and rigorous ways. But because of my care for young people, especially those often from marginalized populations, it has been important to me to foreground my teacher-scholar identity in my research. “Changing the person who I was” is a quote from one of Will’s interviews and is the inspiration for the title of this chapter.

I care deeply about the experiences and stories of high performing, Black youth in urban contexts. I too was an academically high performing Black female student in New York City, the nation’s largest urban school district. Therefore, I sympathize and empathize with Black youth in ways that are very close to my heart. Working and learning *with* this population helps to disseminate stories about Black youth that are often unknown and/or silenced in the academy. As a doctoral student, I have the *privilege* of working with these communities and then I’m tasked with making decisions about how my communities are [re]presented. In this way, I am highly cognizant of the ways I ‘negotiate identities in the field and behind the desk’ (Hill, 2009). This is a huge undertaking that requires many difficult decisions using “dignity and care” (Paris, 2011a, 2011b) as guiding principles. Because I come from similar communities to the ones I am most interested in researching, you could also call me ‘the outsider within’ (Hill Collins, 1991).

In a recent Skype conversation with Dr. Jason Irizarry, he suggested that we work toward “humanizing methodologies.” In that conversation, he defined humanizing methodologies as methodologies that are “mutually enriching” for both the participants and the researchers. Therefore, I adopt a *humanizing research* (Paris & Winn, 2014) stance in the research that I do with youth. Adopting such a stance is the best way that I can attend to the aforementioned issues of ‘temporary’ or ‘fluid’ marginalization, power, and privilege from which I research and write about. In this chapter, I discuss the four organizing methodological frameworks that guided my dissertation study. Those four organizing frameworks are: (1) Projects in Humanization or PiH, (2) Participatory Action Research or PAR, (3) critical ethnographic case study or CECS and Engaged Pedagogy (EP). PiH guide my thinking as I engage in CECS. Employing tenets of PAR can be accurately captured through CECS methods and methodologies. See Figure 3.1

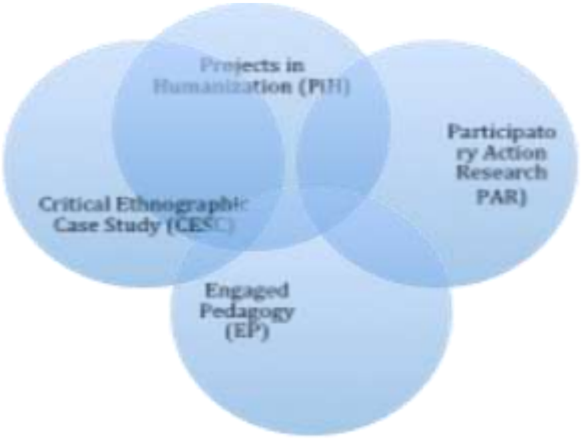

Projects in Humanization (PiH)
Participato ry Action Research PAR)
Critical Ethnographic Case Study (CESC)
Engaged Pedagogy (EP)

Figure 3.1 Organizing Methodological Framework

Projects in Humanization (PiH)

> *Projects in Humanization (PiH) are "grounded in acts of listening that situate us as researchers, advocates, and humans who work with, and not for, each other and other people" (p. 26, Kinloch & San Pedro).*

Projects in Humanization or (PiH) is the first of four organizing methodological frameworks that informs my orientation to education research with young people. In order to engage in research that is "mutually humanizing" for both researchers and participants, Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) assert that we must privilege "the co-construction of knowledge, human agency and voice, diverse perspectives, moments of vulnerability, and acts of listening" (p. 23). This requires us to re-frame traditional positivist notions of conducting empirical research with "objectivity" and "neutrality" between participants and researchers. Humanizing research presupposes that participants and researchers learn from one another in "dialogic" (Bakhtin, 1981) ways. That is, people who are engaged in dialogic conversations actively listen to one another and ask follow up questions that push the conversation in ways that generate new ideas and new understandings. Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) remind us that listening goes beyond hearing words in the air. Rather, they posit:

> …researchers have the responsibility to listen-closely and carefully- to *what* young people are saying, and *how* and f*or what reasons* they are saying it... listening requires us to be attentive to people's utterances, voices, vulnerabilities, body language, lived conditions, backgrounds, and ways of being in the world. (p. 26).

To illustrate this point, I return to a dialogic exchange between Rajon and I in the demo-lab in the middle of his class presentation.[5] After I mentioned to him that with a powerful story like his, he would "likely be able to go to a good college anywhere," Rajon's eyes started to tear up. In that moment, Rajon did not "say" anything per se. However, he was certainly listening to my comments intently. His body language and tears demonstrated that he listened and understood the seriousness of my comment. Further, the context of the situation and his lived experiences created a moment of vulnerability. This was not an anticipated event that could be accounted for in my interview protocol. In that “humanizing moment” I was more than a teacher and I was certainly more than a researcher. More specifically, my “relationship [became] redefined against dichotomous categories of researcher versus participant to researcher-as-participant-listener-as-learner-as-advocate" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 28). Positioning myself as a researcher/participant/listener/learner/advocate feels more true to who I am, my values, and how I think about research.

The email written by Rajon (written after my comments in the demo-lab) facilitated a “dialogic spiral” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 31). According to Kinloch and San Pedro (2014), a dialogic spiral is the construction of a conversation between two or more people whereby the dialogic process of listening and speaking co-create an area of trust between speakers, also known as “the space between.” In that “space between,” the speakers’ discourse reveals vulnerabilities and feelings (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In the case of my student, Rajon’s education metaphor course paper prompted him to write about experiences in his educational life that he had never written about before. Writing about those experiences and expressing himself began a spiral of written, verbal, and involuntary emotional responses (i.e. crying) internally as well as externally from his fellow classmates and the administrative staff in our program.

According to Rajon’s account, this was the longest paper he had ever written. At the time, I was very shocked to learn this information. I used his initial reaction to the assignment as an entry point for conversations about the ways assignments can and do bring certain pieces of our vulnerability to the table in transformative ways. Through this *academic literacy* (Morrell,

2008) we were able to engage and cultivate his *critical literacy* (Morrell, 2008). I understood, in a particularly powerful way, how young people could leverage literacy to "author their own experiences" (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011).

When we reflect on Rajon's words, "I've made education an answer to all of my life problems," we can acknowledge and better understand the intentionality in his pursuit of high academic performance. Instead of attacking the way he articulated himself in the email, my approach was instead to guide him in letting his thoughts "flow" (Rajon). As he began to let his ideas flow, I also helped him to prepare for academic college writing. By engaging in a "dialogic spiral" I was able to facilitate a meaningful assignment- A LENs project. The act of having this young man speak to his experience while asserting agency to author his own text in meaningful ways is the type of work that I value as a teacher, teacher educator, education researcher, mentor, and friend. My research in education seeks to cultivate authoring opportunities for high performing Black male students utilizing an "anti-deficit" (Harper, 2010) lens.

The principles that define PiH "are grounded in actions, languages, perspectives, and concerns of people, generally young people" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 28). Engaging in dialogic spirals and vulnerable moments with young people in collaborative and transformative ways "might initially occur because of research, but not for the sake of research" (p. 40). As such, Kinloch and San Pedro are careful to call such work "projects" in humanization as opposed to "research." Undeniably, I am a researcher who gathers data and makes claims about findings in my writing. At the same time, I also understand that my relationships with my student participants extend beyond this research endeavor. I am also a mentor and friend. Furthermore, I do not teach or work with young people only because I am researcher. As such, my current work with young people can best be described as a Project in Humanization that utilizes tenets of Participatory Action Research, Critical Ethnographic Case Study, and Engaged Pedagogy.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

> *[Participatory Action Research] PAR is an empirical research methodology in which representatives of the focus population(s) participate as co-researchers. PAR projects utilize qualitative, quantitative, and/or less traditional data collection and analysis methods. PAR has an explicit goal of "action" over intervention into the problems being studied. (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 64).*

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the second methodological framework that informs my orientation into research with young people. According Irizarry and Brown (2014), PAR directly addresses the "theory-practice gap" because it creates opportunities for people who are most directly affected by systems of inequality to critically understand their conditions *and* be a part of the problem solving process (p. 66). Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, researchers in the PAR tradition presuppose that local people possess expert knowledge about the conditions of their lives that outsiders cannot access on their own (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Freire, 1970; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2004; Terry, 2010). In my work with academically high performing Black male youth, we (my student participants or co-researchers) employ tenets of PAR.

According to Terry (2010), PAR de-centers “adult” perceptions about what is important and relevant and invites students to forefront what they find important. McIntyre (2000) suggests that PAR has three guiding principles: (1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the investigation leans on local ways of knowing and understanding, and (3) the ultimate goal of taking individual and/or collective action to address the problem. Because of my understandings about the gap in knowledge concerning academically high performing young Black men, my students actively help me to engage in tenets of PAR. More specifically, we investigate issues together in ways that privilege local ways of knowing and understanding. Then, we collectively construct an action plan to address the barriers that young Black men face in academic achievement. With this in mind, participants in my study have opportunities to co-construct "counternarratives" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) about their realities (from their own perspectives), a perspective that is often missing from current research paradigms about Black men in education. In this way, PAR promotes *counternarratives*. The purpose of "counternarratives," a tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is to present alternative perspectives with "voice" that challenges dominant narratives and provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Action is at the heart of PAR work. Action can take shape in a variety of ways such as "teach-ins, workshops, symposia, rallies, and art exhibits" (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 65). What is key to note about PAR oriented action is that it must be authentic and relevant to the study objectives, findings, and to the community's needs, concerns, ways, of knowing and communicating (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Freire, 1970; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2004; Terry, 2010). In these ways, PAR methodology is humanizing research, creating a space in which individuals and communities can work together collaboratively toward more fully realizing their human potential (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 65). Therefore, having the youth I work with as co-constructors in the research process assures this work is "mutually enriching" and "humanizing."

In my writing class, Aaronwick, Shawn, Rajon, and Will read several college-level texts. One of the texts, Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* transformed their thinking about teaching and learning. To illustrate this point, I offer an example from one of my school visits to Quahog High School;[6] Rajon carried the orange book in his book bag. The fact that Rajon carried the reading with him months after the summer program ended, speaks to the impact of this critical reading in his life. The following description of my visit demonstrates this point.

During my visit, I asked Rajon how he was doing in school. He complained that school was "boring" and that all of his teachers engaged in "banking education." He then took his book bag off of his back and pulled out the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was ear marked on page 73. On page 73, Freire provides a bulleted list of the traits of his "banking concept" of education. As Rajon pointed at the words on the page, my face revealed shock as I audibly laughed out loud. I could not believe that Rajon just quoted Freire in the guidance counselor's office where we had a follow up interview that day. He looked at me and laughed also. This example demonstrates how providing Rajon with critical theory gave him language to articulate his experiences in school. This is a clear benefit of what Morrell (2002; 2004) described when we expose urban youth to "academic literacy."

A moment later, Rajon went back into his book bag where he carried the entire binder of other seminal critical readings I gave him months before in my summer writing course. When I asked him why he carried the binder in his book bag, he commented that he reads it "over and over again sometimes." I felt obliged to re-share with Rajon about my plans to influence teacher education through my work as a teacher educator and education researcher. Rajon volunteered to help me noting, "People like to hear what I got to say." He also offered to come speak to some of my undergraduate pre-service students about how to meet the needs of young Black men in the classroom, thereby *crossing boundaries* (Kinloch, 2012) in teaching and learning.

Afterward, he also told me about a project that he was starting at his school- an academic club for other students like him that “don’t want to get caught up.” Together we went on to discuss the process of starting an academic club. More specifically, we discussed the proposal writing process (an academic writing process). He even mentioned that he would use part of his essay from our summer writing class to help get his proposal off the ground. In this dialogic spiral Rajon and I engaged in an unplanned, yet authentic “action” that would directly impact Rajon, his peers, and his local community. This was “action” in the PAR sense of the word. I did not come to Rajon with a ridged pre-packaged seemingly objective agenda about what we would accomplish that day. Rather, we co-constructed something meaningful for the community that he values. What’s most important though, is that I listened to his concerns and he listened to me too. We both were able to get something valuable out of our exchange in ways that pushed one another and ourselves. This was a “mutually enriching” and “humanizing” exchange. In this PiH, I continued to work with Rajon and other young men to investigate problems, privilege local ways of knowing and understanding, and take action to address the problems.

Critical Ethnographic Case Study (CECS)

> *In deeming research critical, it is thus important to look closely and listen carefully in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants in their own terms rather than superimposing our own perspectives of what is problematic and needs to be transformed (Souto-Manning 2014, p. 201).*

Generally ethnographers are concerned with “how” and “why” questions. They try to capture “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) about why things exist they way they do. Traditional cultural anthropologists try to make sense of and ascribe meaning to various cultural phenomena. Ethnography without a critical lens may involve a person going to a foreign or unknown community to describe and make attempts to understand the culture. Conclusions could be drawn about the ‘researched community’ without the input of the community. Often, those conclusions are shared widely *among* and *across* academic disciplines in ways that do not critically challenge the validity or accuracy of the descriptions and presuppositions that inform the conclusions drawn about the 'researched community.' This way of doing ethnographic inquiry is colonizing and dehumanizing. More importantly, it robs people of their voices in the stories that get told about them. I reject this type of ethnographic inquiry and instead engage in critical ethnographic case study inquiry.

Critical ethnographic case study relies on qualitative methods and interpretation of data (Jocson, 2014). Further, Jocson asserts that CECS is also interested in creating generative spaces (both physical and social) where teaching and learning is co-constructed among research participants, thereby creating a new set of shared experiences and knowledge(s). Ethnographic inquiry affords opportunities for layered meanings and representations of those meanings. Additionally, it resists the "domestication of truth" (Glesne, 2011; Jocson, 2014; Madison, 2005). In that way, it moves away from "what is" to "what could be" (Jocson, 2014); it is a methodology of possibility.

Critical ethnographic work does not try to hide behind the mask of supposed "objectivity." Rather, critical ethnographers explicitly address and attend to issues of researcher Positionality (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Jocson, 2014; Madison, 2005). I utilize critical ethnographic *case study* in my research because I am equally interested in what we can learn about academically high performing young Black men as individuals as I am interested in the patterns *among* and *between* them. That is, I am interested in variations and similarities in their experiences and practices. These understandings deepen our abilities to better prepare teachers to recognize, cultivate, and sustain scholarly identities among their Black male students. In this chapter, I have provided a lens into my methodological stance in my research with youth.

You have also learned about the four organizing methodological frameworks that guide my thinking as I enter into research.

Engaged Pedagogy (EP)

In my classroom, I adopt an engaged pedagogical (EP) stance. This concept is adopted from bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* book. It is important to me that my classroom is a space where students feel safe in developing ideas and have the support in using their literacies that capture their whole selves. When I designed my summer writing course for the scholars, I was intentional to listen and care for my students within our “classroom community” (hooks, 1994). According to bell hooks, “[t]eaching is a performative act...that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in a classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 11). In other words, enacting *engaged pedagogy* speaks to the ways I co-construct knowledge *with* the scholars. *On critically conscious research: Approaches to language and literacy* also captures what I attempted to do with my students: "Kincheloe (2004) maintains that critical pedagogy is grounded on social and educational vision of justice and equality, constructed on the belief that education is inherently political, and dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering" as cited in (Willis, 2008, p. 43). Because I am sensitive to the ways young men are often constructed in schools, especially in urban contexts creating this Artifactual LENs assignment is deliberately grounded in both critical and engaged pedagogy. Through this assignment, I hoped the young men could begin to explore parts of themselves that traditional classroom spaces are not always open to receive and value.

In WCL, instead of calling the students “students” we (WCL staff) called them “scholars.” And we treated them as scholars. I was deliberate to expose students to critical theories, readings, and writing assignments in my classroom. Exposing the students to critical theories and believing they had the capacity to read and write with critical comprehension, created an important space within my classroom and the larger WCL program. I entered into our (the scholars' and mine) space and treated the scholars like their voices mattered. I was sure to let them know they could bring their whole selves to the classroom and I tried my best to affirm their ways of being. Like hooks (1994), I believe:

> "[t]o believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin." (p. 13).

I entered into this work with both frustration and excitement about teaching and learning. I was frustrated that I had gone through five years of undergraduate studies, obtained two degrees, taught for two years, and had never been exposed to certain readings. For example, I had never read or learned about critical theories in education. Furthermore, I had not read more than a handful of articles and books written *by* and *about* Black people in ways that promoted a positive sense of self. Unless "Black, "African American," or "diverse" was in the title of a course or professional development session that I engaged with over the years, I was almost certain that I would gain no exposure to learn more about myself or how to disrupt singular stories about people like me. For most of my educational experiences, students ingested information and regurgitated it back on exams and in class essays. Freire (1970) would refer to this process as "banking education."

I was always an inquisitive learner, even as a child. However, my efforts to question the world around me were sometimes punished. I learned how to disconnect from school, even though I was "good" at it because schools did not recognize my intersectional complexities and did not affirm me. Therefore, after my first year in graduate school, I designed a writing curriculum for high school students in an academic enrichment program with several goals in mind to provide the types of affirming and critically engaging experiences I mainly received in graduate school. I wanted my scholars who participated in WCL to (a) wrap up high school and enter college with a set of theoretical and practical tools to affirm their identities and (b) jumpstart their critical thinking in new and interesting ways. I found that when I exposed my students to readings (that I only read for the first time as a graduate student), they engaged *actively* in reading and writing processes in ways that demonstrated their thirst and excitement for learning. This ignited an excitement in me that I have not been able to extinguish. My scholars amaze me and their strengths and struggles sustain me. Further, when my students saw and experienced my love for them and their sensibilities, they worked hard to raise the bar for themselves. For three summers, I worked to enhance the writing curriculum and elevate the standards for my scholars. As I read insightful theories in my doctoral courses and personal research, I added these readings to the summer writing curriculum. The scholars not only read these readings, but they wrote and dialoged critically about these texts in transformative ways.

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[5] See the foreword for the story about Rajon in the demo-lab (p. 43).

[6] Quahog High School is a student-generated pseudonym of his high school and hometown (p. 48).

CHAPTER 4: “It’s Levels To It” (Methods)

> *"Ethnography and its methods are among the most comprehensive and rigorous approaches in the constellation of possibilities in the research galaxy" (Kirkland, 2014, p. 180).*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the four methodological frameworks that inform the methods and tools I utilized in my dissertation study. “It’s levels to it” is a quote from one of Shawn’s interviews. This chapter focuses explicitly on the design, methods, and analyses. The design, methods, and analyses are all informed by the initial data gathered and preliminary analyses from the four scholars. As such, this chapter aims to provide a clear sense of how the research questions are connected to the research design, data methods, and analyses. In this way, I address what constitutes data in my study and how my understandings of the “data” answer the two specific research questions raised in Chapter 1. Now I will remind you of the research questions that were introduced in Chapter 1.

- In what ways might artifactual literacies education narratives (A LENs) function as a catalyst for unpacking the educational experiences of academically high performing young Black men?
- How do these young men (a) construct (define & make sense of), (b) negotiate, and (c) embody scholarly identities as raced and gendered beings?

Overview of Research Design

This study focused on how four academically high performing young Black men from high three urban high schools (across three Midwestern cities) engage in authoring texts and come to understand, negotiate, and embody “scholar identities.” This study had two primary phases: *Phase I* and *Phase II* (discussed in detail in the next section). Informed by a sociocultural theory, my research sought to critically examine the “learning curriculum” (Lave &

Wenger, 1991) of the scholars I worked with and it also uses literacy as lens (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008; Kinloch, 2010; Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, 2013) to understand how these students' "scholar identities" (Whiting, 2006, 2009) were revealed *in* and *across* academic spaces.

The review of the literature suggested the most effective ways to understand and disrupt "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) about academically high performing young Black men in urban contexts is through rigorous and nuanced qualitative interpretative methods. Therefore, I employed a critical ethnographic case study. According to David Kirkland (2014),

> "... the goal of ethnography is not to generalize to large populations, nor to provide a cure-all for big or even basic societal problems. Rather, it is to upset this unidirectionality of terse scientific pursuits, offering complementary and sometimes contradictory information complicating the body politic of large "generalizable" findings... ethnography allows us to see what lives beneath the skin of large, complex, and living things. Ethnography…is a science of nuance and complexity, of the local as opposed to the universal, of the culturally specific as opposed to the socially general" (p. 181).

Kirkland asserts that ethnography, in its very nature, affords the ethnographer opportunities to learn about a population in nuanced ways that intentionally "disrupt dichotomies" (Heath & Street, 2008) about people. Furthermore, according to Dyson and Genishi (2005), qualitative case studies "aim to construct interpretations of other people's…"real worlds" (p. 18) from their own perspectives. Given that we rarely hear from young Black males *about* young Black males (Howard, 2001, 2008), especially academically high performing young Black males, critical ethnographic case study inquiry was both appropriate and necessary for this empirical endeavor.

This research centers youth voice through examining their "learning curriculum" in schools. "[A] learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of the learners" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97). In this case, it involved decentering the master narratives about young Black men and focusing on the learning curriculum functions as a more complete narrative. By closely examining the learning curriculum of these youth, I disrupted the “single story” of young Black men from urban contexts as monolithically unsuccessful in schools.

Research Context(s)

My dissertation study happened across several contexts. It is important to note that when I started my study in WCL at STU, I was unaware which students would end up in my summer writing class. Furthermore, I did not know who would agree to participate in the study. Therefore, I could not anticipate where my study would take me during the academic year. I originally set out to study academically high performing young Black men from urban contexts. In my previous two years of working in the WCL summer program as the writing instructor, most of my students were from urban contexts. However, during the summer of my dissertation study (2013), the four Black males who were in my class came from both urban and suburban contexts. Aaronwick lived in and attended a suburban middle class predominately White high school. However, Rajon, Shawn and Will lived in and attended urban low income predominantly Black and Latino schools.

My transition from WCL at STU into the three different school districts was very interesting and exciting for me. Learning with the scholars *across* contexts helped me to deepen my understandings of who the scholars were and what types of environments facilitated their development. During my time with the scholars, I met their principals, administrators, teachers, parents, friends, and girlfriends. I was gifted with the opportunity to sit in some of their classrooms and observe them. I even had an opportunity to spend time with them at some of their favorite food venues (sometimes during or after school). This involved impromptu neighborhood tours of their communities too. I learned so much from these scholars and I am extremely appreciative. As such, I will provide an overview of the sites involved in my study.

Phase I Contexts

We choose to learn summer program overview. Because of the cross-context and longitudinal nature of the study, “it’s levels to it.” This was a quote from Shawn as he described the background inspiration for his Artifactual LENs essay. He noted there were “levels” to the ways school in urban communities operated to oppress Black and Latino students from low-income neighborhoods. I have adopted his voice in this case to name the chapter because I want to demonstrate that in order to get a “corrective” view from the LENs of the students, it is important to have a layered approach in research design, methods and analysis.

Within this research, I was a “researcher-participant-listener-advocate" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). To be specific, I was the writing course instructor (one of four academic courses) offered in the WCL pre college summer program. The WCL pre-college summer program is offered to 20 rising high school seniors from three Midwestern cities at Success Ticket University (STU). Among the 20 students registered for the WCL summer program, sixteen of the students identified as Black and four of the students identified as Mexican. Among the Black students, there were a total of four male students. I asked all four Black male students to participate in my research study. Therefore, I engaged in “convenience sampling” (Glesne, 2011), which is often utilized among teachers who study students in their own classrooms.

As participants in the summer pre-college program, the scholars were housed in the university’s residence halls for approximately four weeks from July-August 2013. In this program, the students took four academic classes; they taught elementary students at a local elementary school; and they participated in various social, academic and professional development enrichment activities. The four academic classes the students took in the summer program were (A) writing, (B) critical examination of urban education, (C) college preparation, and (D) educational leadership. All of the academic course instructors identified as Black and biracial. The instructor for class A was a Black female (me). The instructor for class B was a biracial (Black and White) male. The same instructor, a Black female, taught the last two courses.

This was a longitudinal, cross-context study with two primary phases. Therefore, my methodological approach was layered across these two contexts. *Phase I* began in a pre-college residential university-sponsored summer enrichment program, where I was the writing instructor for the student participants. I developed and implemented the writing course curriculum for rising seniors in high school from urban schools, with the following aims in mind: expose students to college level texts (e.g. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire), cultivate college level academic writing, develop scholarly research skills, increase college readiness, and nurture careers in education. Many of the readings were readings that I came across in my doctoral courses. *Phase II* followed the young men from the summer enrichment program into their respective urban high schools during the academic school year, which spanned across three different school districts in the Midwest.

The first phase (*Phase I*) took place during the summer program during July and August 2013. The next phase (*Phase II*) took place after the students left the WCL summer program. I now discuss the environment of *Phase I* of the research design and data collection processes. During the time of the program, I spent most of my days with the students, even when they were not in my writing class. More specifically, I observed them in other classrooms (a) as students and (b) as teachers. I also attended social field trips and professional development and academic enrichment activities. The environment of the larger pre-college program, as well as my classroom, was committed to providing our *scholars*, (how we refer to the students for the duration of the program) with rigorous academic work and enriching social experiences. Participating in the aforementioned types of activities allow youth to access “identity building episodes” (Nasir, 2012) as “doers” and “learners,” which affords them opportunities to (re)position themselves as competent and valued (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) in the summer program. In other words, the summer program aims to provide a positive social and academically rigorous experience, in which students’ cultural and academic ways of being are supported and respected.

Liberty school (elementary school program). A unique component of the WCL pre-college program was that each student in the program went to a local elementary school program, Liberty School, where they led literacy-oriented activities. The scholars worked in teaching teams of four students. For example, the students read books with the elementary students and came up with various activities to extend and challenge the students’ engagement with the various texts. I was able to be a part of some of their lesson planning sessions as well as the executions of those lessons. When I observed them in other classrooms as students, I took notes in either my notes or on my cell phone. The content of my notes were similar in nature to when I observed the students in other academic courses as students.

There were three particularly interesting features of observing the scholars as teachers. That is, I was able to hear their meta-thinking behind choosing particular activities. This helped me to better understand how they made sense of classroom engagement and the creativity they used to do so. Secondly, I was able to see some of their lessons in action. This helped me to understand the ways the students dealt with younger people and their personal values. The scholars really wanted the elementary students to learn and grow to become better students. Because the scholars were academically high performing students, they had high expectations for the elementary students. In cases when they felt like the elementary students were not getting a particular aspect of the lesson, they went to great lengths to make sure they helped the elementary students to master content.

Since the scholars worked in teaching teams, I observed individual scholars take elementary students to the side to explain assignments in ways that particular elementary student could understand. The scholars received compliments from the school leaders for their intricate and sophisticated levels of detail in lesson planning and execution with the elementary students. This encouraged the scholars to continue and strengthen their work with the elementary students. My initial observations of the scholars as teachers are mentioned here to provide glimpses of the different ways these young men embodied scholar identities. Further, they offer *counternarratives* about of the young men.

Phase II Contexts

Northwood High School (Aaronwick's school). Aaronwick was 16-year-old senior in high school during the 2013-2014 academic school when I did my follow up interviews. As I arrived to the neighborhood, I noticed beautiful brick houses with two car garages, well-manicured lawns, luxury vehicles, and fancy streets with speed bumps. Along the streets, some people were walking their dogs. Others were jogging near the golf course. As I walked up the school, there were colorful flowers and plants near the entrance of school. When I entered the parking lot of the school, I noticed there were multiple brick buildings associated with the school. It reminded me of a college campus. A security guard guarded the entrance of the parking lot. He asked who I was and what the nature of my visit was. I explained that I was from STU and was here to visit with a student. He then pointed me to the direction of available parking spaces for visitors. There were probably hundreds of parking spaces in the large parking lot. Most were designated for students and some of the spaces were assigned to the administrators and teachers.

When I walked into the main building of the school, I asked a student walking by to direct me to the main office. The young White male student gladly pointed me in the direction of the main office. Upon entry to the main office, there were two middle-aged White females sitting at the front desk. They both greeted me. One of the women asked how she could help me. Once again, I explain the nature of my visit. She looked up Aaronwick's schedule to find out what class he was in at the time. She said that he had lunch in a few minutes and wanted to know if I wanted to meet him in the library upstairs. I said sure and asked for the visitor book. She said, "You are fine. No need to sign in." She handed me a nametag and a marker. Afterward she provided me with directions to get to the library, which was on the second floor. I walked along the hallways and glanced in the classrooms along the way. According to the school's website, the student population was 70% White, 20% Black, and 10% Asian.

Urbantown High School (Shawn and Will's school). Shawn and Will both attended Urbantown high school and they also lived in the same neighborhood in Urbantown. Their school was 98% Black male (single sex school). The area immediately surrounding the school was a low-income area and featured several abandoned buildings and vacant parking lots. The school was situated on the corner of a dead end block. The building itself was not marked with Urbantown on the building. As such, I was unsure whether I arrived at the right location. The school had flags hanging outside of the building, which featured the name of an elementary school. I walked around building to find an entry point into the school. The first door that I walked up to was locked, leaving me unable to enter. I noticed an intercom with a bell on it, so I pressed it and said that I was here to visit students from Urbantown High School and asked if I was in the right location. The seemingly female voice on the other end of the intercom told me that I was in the right place, but on the wrong side of the building. As she spoke, I noticed the camera that looked me in the face. I knew that she could see me, but I was unable to see her. She provided instructions for me to leave the current door and walk around to the back of the school, which is where Urbantown High School was. I was the Urbantown Elementary School entrance to the building.

When I walked around to the Urbantown High School side of the building, the door was locked as well. Therefore, I pressed the nearby intercom. The seemingly male voice on the other end of the intercom asked who I was. I explained who I was and why I was at the building. Afterward, the security guard pressed the intercom button giving me clearance to enter the building. I pulled the door open and walked inside. Once I was inside of the building, the security guard (a middle aged Black male) asked me to sign in the guest book and to put my things through the nearby scanner belt. As I leaned down to sign the book, I noticed several television screens with security or surveillance footage, which monitored various angles of the outside and inside of the building. After walking through the metal detector and receiving my bags on the other end of the scanner belt, the security guard handed me a name badge and directed me to the main office. In the main office, the administrative assistant asked who I was and the nature of my visit. I responded accordingly. She called the Will and Shawn down to the main office to meet me.

Quahog High School (Rajon's school). At the time of our interview, Rajon was a 17-year-old Black male who attended an urban co-educational high school in Quahog (pseudonym).

He was a senior in high school during my on-site high school visits for follow up interviews. Rajon’s high school was located in a historically Black neighborhood with an increasingly diverse population of Latino/a and White students over the last three years. The school population during the year Rajon’s senior year was 77% Black, 13% Hispanic. Further, 86% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Though Rajon was eligible for free lunch, he refused the “school lunch.” He said the food was “nasty” and he preferred to eat food out of the vending machines located throughout the school. The students were allowed to leave the school for lunch and I often took Rajon to the local McDonald’s or iHop during my visits to make sure he ate a meal.

Two years prior (during Rajon’s sophomore year in high school), the school was ranked as an improvement school on the verge of re-constitution. However, for his senior year the school had improved its test scores and lost the label of an improvement school. One of the principal’s initiatives was to create a “college-going culture” in the school. This was an expressed goal written in the main office of the building and was also evidenced by college/university flags hanging in the halls in front of classrooms. Rajon shared that his college counselor received incentives for getting students to apply to colleges and universities throughout the nation. He applied to over 20 colleges and universities to make sure that his college counselor received “credit” for encouraging students to apply to college.

Though Will, Shawn, and Rajon attended schools in urban communities, I had vastly different experiences at both schools. My experiences at Aaronwick and Rajon’s schools were most similar, even though they were situated within different contexts.

Scholar participants overview profile. There were four young Black men in the summer 2013 cohort program at STU. All four Black males were rising seniors in high school and participated in all aspects of the summer program and my research. Three of the four scholars were 17 years old when I first met them and the last scholar (Aaronwick) was 16 years old. Each young man volunteered to be interviewed and allowed me opportunities to visit them in their respective high schools during the 2013-2014 academic school year (the summer after the WCL program). In other words, I spent time with the young men during their transition summer from 11th grade to 12th grade and I followed up with each young man during their 12th grade year high school.

During their senior year in high school, the young men took classes, participated in various extra-curricular activities, and applied to college and for scholarships. Further, most of the scholars turned 18 years old, thereby becoming "legal adults." I'll re-visit this last point in the Chapter 6, which emphasizes the identities of the young men. Three of the four young men lived in and attend schools in urban communities. One of the young men lived in and attended a school in a suburban community.

Part of the process was to complicate the narrative about what counted as "academically high performing" and to complicate notions or definitions of success and for whom. Prior to entering WCL, each young man in the study had at least a 3.0 GPA on a 4.0 scale in his respective school district. Because the young men came from different cities and attended schools in different school districts, what counted as an "A" for example varied from school to school. Furthermore, the rigor of the content within each school counted differently. In other words, these scales are not balanced and there is not an adequate system to account for these differences. Each scholar reported experiences of "banking" pedagogies in their schools. The standard measure of assessment that I had for the young men was their ACT scores. The highest score that one can score on the ACT exam is a 36. Please see Table 4.1 that captures the overview of the scholars in a chart format.

Table 4.1

We Choose To Learn (WCL) Scholar Profile Overview Data Chart

Scholar	**Aaronwick Munn**	**Rajon Thompson**	**Shawn Alexander**	**Will Allen**
Age	16	17	17	17
School Type	Suburban	Urban	Urban	Urban
High School Name	Northwood High School	Quahog High School	Urbantown High School	Urbantown High School
ACT	22	22	32	23
GPA @ Start of WCL	3.0	3.3	3.68	3.9
ALEN Essay Title	If You Don't Use It, You Lose It	Don't Get Caught Up in Life	Incarcerated Students	Build Your Education
Household Adults	Mother & Stepdad	Mother	Mother & Stepdad	Mother
Siblings	• Little brother	• Older brothers • Younger sisters	• Older brother • Younger sisters	• Younger sisters

In addition to these "standard measures of academic achievement," the scholars also displayed "scholar identity traits" (Whiting, 2006, 2009) to varying degrees. That is, these young men exhibited: (1) self-efficacy, (2) future orientation, (3) willing to make sacrifices, (4) internal locust of control, (5) self-awareness, (6) strong need for achievement, (7) academic self-confidence, (8) race pride, and (9) masculinity (Whiting, 2009b). Because of the construction of

Whiting’s scholar identity model, I am able to extend, complicate, and challenge what counts as academically high performing.

According to Whiting, “scholar identities” require two components: (1) academic performance and (2) effort to see one’s self as a scholar. While these “scholar identity traits” are useful, they do not account for the fact that the young men actually wanted to “learn for the fun of it” (Aaronwick). Further, these “scholar identity traits” do not provide a space to explore how these young men came to these traits or what allowed these scholar identity traits to sustain or persist. Without exploring these questions, it might put forth a problematic assumption that these traits are only inherent or intrinsic and therefore cannot be acquired, learned or taught. As such, this area is currently under-theorized. For example, Will would agree with the notion that ‘liking learning’ and ‘doing well’ in school are learned traits. But because schools are set up to “weed” (according to Will) students are pushed to dislike and disengage from school.

College bound Black young men. All of the young men were college bound before I met them. As such, I cannot take credit for their attendance in the WCL summer program. After participating in the WCL, all four scholars applied to multiple colleges, including Success Ticket University (STU). All four young men were accepted to STU and two actually attended STU in the fall of 2014. All of the scholars were freshmen in college at the time of the completion of this manuscript.

The WCL staff members and I spoke to all of the young men at length about college and the application college process. They shared their hopes and dreams about college with me. They (Shawn, Will, and Rajon) also expressed some concerns about being inadequately prepared to perform well academically in college. They all believed that they had what it took to do well in school in general. However, they all wondered to what extent their schools had properly prepared them for the academic rigor to compete at the collegiate level with students with various academic training in high school.

Despite a mix of overlapping contradictions of neutral, positive, and negative experiences in classrooms and schools, they thought of education as an "opportunity" or "ticket" for a better life. All of the young men expressed a love for learning new things. The young men never constructed themselves as victims. They enjoyed the intellectual pursuit of intelligence and understood this as different from doing well in school.

According to hooks (1994), excitement and learning could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and or academic engagement. I was fortunate to witness this first-hand with the scholars who participated in WCL- a summer academic enrichment program that did *not* provide any grades or college credits. The scholars stayed up late and woke up early just to take advantage of the opportunity to read and write about things they had never (according to their account) been exposed to before. They spent time in office hours, studied at the library, did research on the Internet, and sent us (program leaders and instructors) email inquiries about the curriculum content. The scholars spoke with acquired language and confidence to name or speak explicitly about the ways they were implicated within and because of educational systems. They learned how to "do" school. The scholars motivated one another; there was a sense of friendly motivation among the scholars. They would encourage one another in classrooms and discuss one another positively in interviews. For example, Shawn and Will debated in a focus group interview about who had the most college acceptances and the most scholarship funds. Rajon posted on Facebook that he was excited that "my boys from [urbantown] going to school for free…oh yea." Two of the scholars even created an entrepreneurial business venture together. Table 4.2 provides a brief snapshot the scholars' college bound profiles.

Table 4.2

We Choose To Learn (WCL) College Bound Scholar Overview Data Chart

Scholar	**Aaronwick Munn**	**Rajon Thompson**	**Shawn Alexander**	**Will Allen**
AP & Honors Courses Taken Senior Year	AP European History AP Physics AP Math	AP English Honors Physics	● British Lit Honors	• British Lit Honors
Courses Taken Senior Year (Non AP/Honors)	• Debate • Film Literature • Tutorial • Anthropology	• College Readiness • Art • Meteorology	• Biology • Government • Math	• Biology • Government • Math
College Generation Status	Non-first generation	First generation	First generation	First generation
Mother's Highest Education	PhD	High school	Community college	High school
Fall 2014 College Attendance Type	PWI	PWI	HBCU	PWI
College Scholarship	Partial scholarship	Full ride	Full ride	Full ride
College Major	Education (secondary)	Education (secondary)	Education (secondary)	Education (elementary)

Data Collection

In order "[t]o try to get at the deepened, complex understanding, three data-gathering techniques are dominant in qualitative inquiry: observation, interviewing, and document collection. Multiple means of data development can contribute to research trustworthiness…

[and] sense of authenticity...the more sources contributing, the richer the data and the more complex the findings" (Glesne, 2011, p. 48). As such, I collected several types of data: (a) writing samples throughout the program; (b) videos of each class session; (c) audio recorded individual student interviews; (d) observation field notes; and (e) reflective memos about informal conversations. Through my layered methodological data collection process I hoped to ‘learn both *from* the research and *through* the research’ (Halbritter & Lindquist, 2012).

Phase I Data Collection

Phase I began in a pre-college residential university sponsored summer enrichment program, where I was the writing instructor for the student participants. I developed and implemented the writing course curriculum for rising seniors in high school from urban schools, with the following aims in mind: expose students to college level texts, cultivate college level academic writing, develop scholarly research skills, increase college readiness, and nurture careers in education. I was intentional about creating “intellectual and social safety” (Lee, 2006). Therefore, I designed and managed a robust learning environment to maximize the opportunities for my students to learn (Lee, 2006).

In addition to reading the works below (see Figure 4.1), I also created mini lessons throughout the summer to scaffold students in identifying and developing arguments. For example, I utilized Wendy Belcher's (2009), *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, Chapter 5, which explains how to construct strong arguments. I also adapted mini lessons from Rosa and Eschholz's (2009) *Models for Writers: Short Essays and Compositions* and Hairston, Ruszkiewicz, and Friend's (2002) *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* to provide guidance in composing. Overall, I attempted to create both scaffolded and generative learning spaces. Therefore, we were de-constructing critical theories in education, investigating literary devices (i.e. metaphor), learning about authors (to help the scholars think about where and why people enter into writing), providing pictures of the authors, asking questions about the title of texts before we read them, etc. All of these scaffolding techniques aided the scholars in accessing and building upon their prior knowledge. In this way, I honored their "local funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Activating their localized prior knowledge of the readings helped to create invaluable entry points into writing process. We practiced reading like writers throughout the WCL academic enrichment summer program.

Next, you will find the syllabus the scholars received on the first day of class:

Excerpt of writing course syllabus.

Classroom Assignments:

Reflective Essays
Each student is required to submit a 1-page double-spaced reflective essay based on the course readings to gauge the manner in which students are interpreting course content. Reflective essays should not be mere summaries of course readings, but an analysis, reflection and engagement with course readings. Students may be asked to share from their reflections to generate critical questions for class discussion groups. Use the following guideline when writing your reflections. *(Be sure to refer to Reflective Guidelines for specific details):*

1. Analyze. Demonstrate that you have understood and carefully engaged the arguments of the readings *(this should be the bulk of your paper).*
2. Consider how briefly referencing your personal experiences (in K-12 schools or outside of school) might enliven your response AND provide a sense of how you are making broader connections between the readings and the larger social and historical context of schooling.
3. 1-2 Burning Questions

In the course we read the following texts. With each assignment, students were expected and did write what I called "critical reflectives" about each reading.

- The Complexity of Identity (B. D. Tatum, 1997)
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970)

- Metaphors we live by (Lakoff & Johnson, 2011)
- Dripping with literacy, a jazz-fueled road trip, a place to breathe (Zancanella, 2007)
- Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992)
- Girls zines as a global literacy practice (Guzzetti, 2013)
- Inventing masculinity: Young Black males, literacy, and tears (Kirkland, 2012)

At the end of the summer program, students engaged in a "Me-Search" Mapping Assignment (or what I theorize as Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives- A LENs).

"Me-Search" mapping: An academic autobiography.

Paper Description – Draft 1 July 22, 2013; Draft 2 due July 24, 2013

This work is meant to be a tool for personal, political and intellectual reflection about yourself and its impact on your educational and life experiences. It is important and beneficial for you to continuously assess your personal development, confront your weaknesses, and acknowledge your strengths. The purpose of this assignment is to grant you the opportunity to personally, politically, and intellectually reflect on the content of this writing class and your experiences (or lack thereof). In this paper, I expect that you will utilize course readings, discussions, presentations, etc., to reflect on how you're processing in this writing class. However, you should feel free to bring in your experiences from any of your classes this summer, even at the Freedom School. Within your paper, please consider addressing areas of personal resistance, new knowledge/perspectives, change, and/or insights.

To inspire your thoughts, please consider questions such as:

- What do I think of school? What is the purpose of school or education? What has the purpose of school been in my life?
- What types of activities and engagements do I think happen there? Why do they happen?
- How have my educational experiences been influenced by my identity?
- How have my life experiences contributed to my understanding of others and myself?
- What significant life experiences have I had that have contributed to my perceptions of racial, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. identities in education?
- How, if at all, can I use education to create new opportunities for myself (and/or the people I care about)?

> This paper should include a metaphor that compares your academic experiences to something else. Consider how Paulo Freire compared his thoughts about education to "banking." When you think about your experiences in education (as a teacher or student), what would you compare it to? This should not be a boring essay, so please tell your stories in full detail and help the reader experience the moment by using sensory images, active verbs, and compelling metaphors. Please include a visual aid to show your metaphor. We will display these visual aids in class on July 24, 2013 when we do our Gallery Walks.
>
> You are expected to use 3-5 readings from your classes. At least 2 readings should be from our writing class this summer. You should cite these authors accordingly, and demonstrate through your writing how you understand their ideas, and the relationship between these ideas and the experiences you are describing.

Video recorded class sessions and digital observations. On the first day of class (before I turned on the video cameras), I explained to the entire class that I am a full-time doctoral student in teacher education and that I am conducting education research. I told the scholars about my interests in helping teachers through my role in teacher education (i.e. by teaching undergraduate courses, working with intern teachers, and sharing my research at education related conferences). Because of my interest in literacy, I explained that I want to document the types of activities that we do in class, their writing, and their comments about the topics we discuss in class. In order to assure that I did not miss anything, I recorded every class session. "Videotaping has been invaluable in qualitative research approaches [because] videotapes may be played and replayed, analyzed frame by frame, as a means for close observation aimed at uncovering practices by which people perform some aspect of their everyday lives" (Glesne, 2011, p. 81).

After my overview to the class, I gave each student an opportunity to choose to sit outside of the view of the camera. I informed every student that they had the right to change their minds and move away from the view of the camera at any point during the four-week program. Every student signed an assent form and agreed to be videotaped during our class sessions. I think it is significant to note that at no point during the four weeks did a student in public or private express that they did not want to be on camera. In fact, there were days when the students helped me to set up the cameras, break them down, or take them to and from my office, which was located in the building where I taught the writing class.

For my research, there were at least two video cameras in each of the 11 class sessions. One camera captured the front view of the classroom and the other captured the back view of the classroom. My primary role in the classroom during class was as course instructor. As such, each class session was recorded so that I could focus on my primary role as the teacher. Furthermore, I wanted to make sure that *all* students had opportunities for a rigorous academic classroom experience. In this way, my researcher identity was slightly "backgrounded" while I was teaching.

After each class session, I reviewed the videos and took notes about things I found interesting that related to my two research questions. Reviewing the videos helped me in a number of ways. For example, they "help [to] produce questions and analytical thoughts while doing…research [and they can be] used to stimulate research participants' reflections on their lives in relationship to issues of power or struggles in local and larger contexts" (Glesne, 2011, p. 82). Furthermore, the videos served to re-live events that happened in class with the four Black male students during our interviews. Viewing the videos also helped me to write more informed "analytic memos" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) or "conceptual memos" (Heath & Street, 2008). Lastly, the videos helped me to "triangulate" (Glesne, 2011) the data that I collected from the four young Black men in my class. If the students made comments in class, but wrote about something that contradicted a comment they made in class, I asked the student about the discrepancy either in the paper, the next day in class or an informal setting, during office hours, or sometimes in our formal interviews. Altogether, the videos aided in providing more nuance and completeness to the ethnographic narratives of the young men.

Audio recorded interviews. I interviewed all four Black male students in the WCL pre-college summer program individually and at separate times throughout the four-week program. One male was from a suburban context, and the other three males were from large, urban contexts. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted 30-90 minutes per session. Interviews were transcribed after the formal interviews and later coded for open, thematic, analytic, and focused coding methods with the goal to describe, interpret, and explain the visual images (Charmaz, 1988, 2013; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Glesne, 2011).

Table 4.3

Summary of Formal Data Received from Scholars

	Interviews	Writing Samples
Aaronwick	3	9
Rajon	5	9
Shawn	3	9
Will	3	9
Total	14	36

During my initial observations and interviews, I understood that listening was critical. “[L]istening requires us to be attentive to people's utterances, voices, vulnerabilities, body language, lived conditions, backgrounds, and ways of being in the world" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 26). Therefore, I paid close attention to what my students said as well as how they said it. I "listened to learn" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) more about how my students experienced education as academically high performing Black male students. More specifically, I made field notes about points when their body language changed or I audio recorded myself immediately after our formal interviews to remind myself about gestures or other notable events that occurred during the course of the interview. I also made written and verbal notes about why I thought the student made such gestures during the interviews.[7] At times during our interviews in the WCL and on site at their respective high schools, I would reference readings from class. Throughout the school year, as I read more research and popular and alternative media about young Black men, sometimes I would ask the scholars about their opinions in our audio recorded interviews.

Observation notes. I observed the students in a number of settings throughout the four-week WCL pre-college summer program. Those settings primarily fell into three different types of observations: (1) the scholars as students in their other three academic classes in the summer program; (2) the scholars as instructors at a local elementary school and; (3) the scholars during their academic enrichment workshops and extracurricular activities. In my field notes I included: (a) descriptions and (b) reflections- observer's frame of mind, ideas, and concerns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, 2006).

When I observed the scholars outside of my writing classroom, I took copious notes either in my notebook, on my cell phone or on my laptop, depending of the context of the situation. For example, if the students were writing, I used my notebook or cell phone to take notes. In my notes I wrote about the location of the event; the time. the content, the speakers or leaders, how the students interacted with the leaders and with one another, questions or hunches that I wanted to follow up about in future meetings, and I also drew pictures about what I was observing to capture where things were located. I also audio recorded many of the sessions that I observed. In this way, my observation notes were very interactive and “layered” (Jocson, 2014) and I was able to make interesting connections between my course and other courses.

I noticed how students engaged in different courses. I was able to observe the ways in which the students synthesized their understandings of their academic content *across* the courses. They often referred to something they read about in other courses or they remembered videos they watched in other courses that helped them to understand the context being offered in a given classroom. This was very exciting and refreshing to observe and sometimes actively participate in (via making a comment in class).

These observations were similar in nature to the observations that I conducted at the Liberty Elementary School and their respective schools. I observed the ways these young men constructed, negotiated, and embodied scholarly identities *across* academic spaces. Being in their classrooms and schools helped me to understand the support systems that were in place to help these young men to be(come) and maintain scholar identities.

Reflective memos. Every day after one of my interactions with the students, either as a teacher or an observer-participant in other classes, at the elementary school, hanging out at lunch or in the dorms, I wrote “reflective memos” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, 2006; Dyson & Genishi, 2005) about what happened and how I felt about what happened. The opening reflective memo excerpt about Rajon was typical for one of my end of the day reflective memos. The date, time, location, scene, atmosphere and initial thoughts and ideas were captured in my reflective memos. While I was not able to write about every single moment of every single day, I intentionally chose to write about important moments with one of the four young Black men in the program. I aimed to provide “portrait” of the scholars (Lawrence Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis 1997).

Phase II Data Collection

Phase II followed the young men from the summer enrichment program into their respective urban high schools during the academic school year, which spanned across three different school districts in the Midwest. Because of my access to the young men *in* and *across* different academic settings, I was able to contextualize ethnographically and compare the ways the young men constructed, negotiated, and embodied literacy identities in different spaces.

Audio recorded interviews. For my dissertation study, I engaged in multiple audio-recorded interviews with each student during the academic school year and engage in "member reflections" (San Pedro, 2014 personal communication). Member reflections were opportunities for me to return to the students and share transcripts from prior interviews or examine previous textual data. The member reflections were targeted because I asked students specific questions about my initial understandings of the data gathered. In those moments, I was able to get confirmation about the messages they tried to convey in their paper or interviews. Also, this afforded opportunities for the students to add or challenge some of my understandings (or perhaps add personal understanding). As I continued to build with and learn from my students, these interviews enhanced the accuracy and quality of information gathered with and about individual scholars. During follow up interviews, I shared new journal articles that I came across during the school year, which discussed Black students in education. I also gained some of their insights on the articles and we would have dialogic discussions about the content. The scholars confirmed, complicated, and/or refused some of the content of the articles.[8]

Critical narrative analysis. I applied CNA as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding how the scholars took up the readings, artifactual literacies education narratives and their subsequent interviews that served as reflections about the former.

Each scholar read the same literature from the writing course and they all dialogued about the readings in small groups during the writing class. At the end of WCL, each scholar wrote an artifactual literacies education narrative (A LENs) and had an initial interview about their narratives during the summer program. In analyzing their artifactual literacies education narratives, I triangulated the concepts raised in their essays with their interviews, reflective writing about the assignment, my observations, and the videos from class. Through this method, I was able interrogate their Artifactual LENs and how those narratives were recycled within larger discourses on education, meritocracy, institutional and individual agency.

In the context of the summer program, each student had access to laptops. Student writings ("texts") served as one type of data in the study. Their texts were full of meaning and also provided A LENs into the lives of the scholars. Student texts manifested in multiple formats. For example, within the context of the summer writing course, students responded to writing prompts in the curriculum. Once students authored those texts, they emailed those texts directly to me via email. Once the students' papers were received, I provided feedback for every student in the class (all 20 students).

The four Black male scholars' texts were coded and analyzed using CNA (Souto-Manning, 2014a, 2014b). According to Souto-Manning, CNA combines two research methodologies, "critical discourse analysis" and "narrative analysis" in such a way that they can each productively inform one another. CDA is concerned with "institutional discourses, question the definition of power discourses, and suggests the intertexual recycling of institutional discourses in personal narratives and the adoption of personal narratives in institutional discourses" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 206). Whereas, Narrative Analysis (NA) is concerned with how people appropriate themselves and others in their own narratives. Souto-Manning explains that CNA effectively examines *both* the institutional and personal discourses of narratives in ways that help us to understand how they shape and are shaped by one another. As such, she notes there are two primary components of CNA are grammatical agency and framing agency.

> Grammatical agency is agency portrayed linguistically by the use of subject plus action verb. When one portrays oneself as an actor in the sentence (subject) as opposed to a passive recipient of the action (object), grammatical agency is displayed. Framing agency is the narrator's character alignment with normative and situated morals (p. 208).

In this way, CNA provides both a language and a tool for the type of research and analytical work that I conducted with my research participants. For example, when I think about my relationship with my student Rajon, I am forced to consider both his (1) grammatical agency and (2) framing agency. In the quote,

> …I sat back and thought about my life experiences and what not and all the problems I've avoided to be where I am. I realized how I've never got caught up in any situations I couldn't get myself out of… (Rajon email communication on 7/24/13).

Through his framing agency (alignment with normative and situated morals) he acknowledged that he has avoided “problems” in his life. At the same time, Rajon displayed grammatical agency because he was taking responsibility for *not* getting caught up in negative situations that would have stifled his high academic performance in school. Therefore, Rajon expressed that constructing the writing assignment for our class provided an avenue for him to author his agency in his personal narrative.

It is important to examine the students’ narratives because "[t]hrough stories, individuals make sense of their realities, come to question issues affecting their lives, start problem posing" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 205). CNA helps researchers and participants understand and question the ways institutional discourses inform personal narratives. Therefore, it helps people to see and understand their own agency in critically meaningful and transformative ways. With my students, the preliminary analyses from utilizing a CNA method was used to inform individualized “semi-structured interviews” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Glesne, 2011; Heath & Street, 2008; Morrell, 2004) with the students during the summer program. Because I saw each student approximately 5-7 days a week during the summer program either in class, during office hours or in more formalized settings (i.e. class, audio recorded interviews), I also addressed any lingering questions about how and why they authored their narratives in specific ways.

“Narrative is one of the most broadly employed ways of systematizing human experience. As human beings, we experience our worlds and live our lives by telling stories” (Souto-Manning, 2014b, p. 162 . Montero and Washington note, "people live out their lives narratively” (Montero & Washington, 2011). CNA proposes that when individuals make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional) situations in place (Souto-Manning, 2014b). By carefully analyzing these micro and macro experiences, I was able to show or re-present the scholars’ schooling experiences in ways that were helpful to those concerned about the lives of Black young men in education.

Discourse shapes society and is shaped by society (Gee, 1990, 1996). Thus, it is an inherent and inseparable part of the social world, of the broader social context (Souto-Manning, 2014b). And since social realities become realities through discourse, we cannot ignore the role of discourse in trying to understand complex relationships involving social interactions, structures, and everyday lives (Souto-Manning, 2014b). Analyzing the triangulated narratives of the scholars allowed me to better understand these complex relationships involving the aforementioned social interactions, structures, and everyday lives of the scholars.

In order to facilitate a *humanizing* (Paris & Winn, 2014) and engaged pedagogies (hooks, 1994), I was purposeful in the classroom assignments I constructed for and with my students. First, I wanted to get to know my students, what they valued, and where they were from. I wanted to also get to know them in a creative and memorable way. Therefore, on the first day of class, I had each to student to write eight lines of text to introduce themselves. I noted that this text could be a song, poem, or rap. However, there were three stipulations. The text must include their name, the city they were from, and their high school. I told each student they would have to work in groups. The scholars were provided with iPads to introduce themselves to the rest of the class. I had to tell students they had the liberty to move outside of the classroom, go in the hallway or outside to develop their videos. At first, it was like they were not used to leaving the classroom to do work. Some students even raised their hands for permission, demonstrating indoctrination of traditional ritualized schooling practices.

In this chapter, I explicitly addressed the methods used for the dissertation study. The design, methods, and analyses were informed by the initial data gathering and preliminary analyses gathered from the research participants. I aimed to provide a clear sense of how the research questions are connected to the data methods and analyses proposed in this chapter. Therefore, I addressed what constitutes “data” in the proposed study and how my understandings of the “data” answer the four specific research questions raised in Chapter 1.

Analytic category development. In order to demonstrate the process of developing analytic categories, I revisited the findings from the study. After carefully examining the responses from each scholar and across the scholars, several patterns emerged. Of those patterns, I address two of them in this dissertation. I refer to these two major patterns as analytic categories and they comprise the two findings chapters (Chapters 5 and 6, respectively). The first finding in this study is that the scholars' writing functioned as a catalyst for unpacking their racialized and gendered experiences as young Black men. The second analytic category addressed the intersectional identities of the scholars due to several "untold stories" that emerged about the young Black men.

There are four analytic frameworks that guided my analyses of the aforementioned analytic categories- Projects in Humanization-PiHs (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014), Critical Narrative Analysis-CNA (Souto-Manning 2014a; Souto-Manning, 2014b), Critical Race Consciousness-CRC (Carter, 2008), and Scholar Identity Model (Whiting, 2009). PiHs are the primary framework through which I understand the latter frameworks. PiHs are grounded in acts of *listening* and the telling, retelling, and re-presenting of stories in nonlinear ways; as such the stories presented are complicated, complex, and multi-voiced (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). While I utilized all four frameworks in both of the analytic category chapters, I rely more heavily on CNA in Chapter 5.

Analytic Category 1: Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives or "A LENs".

My first finding was that developing A LENs examined stories of (de)humanization, meritocracy, and refusal. These stories were articulated through the (a) content, (b) process, and (c) impact of their projects. Consistent with the literature, the scholars' artifacts were "heavy with meaning" and provided "a platform from which students can access literate identities" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Therefore, the artifacts also offered "insights about everyday life, and provide an understanding of culture, family, and community" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. vii). The richness of meaning that provided insights about everyday life could be seen in all of the artifacts. My Black male students wanted to do well in school in spaces that acknowledge, value, and respect their humanity. However, they often felt constrained in expressing their creativity and intelligence in their traditional classrooms. This led me to believe that their schools (in their current form), was killing the curiosity of my students, even though they were academically high performing students. The critical pedagogical approach discussed in this analytic category was humanizing and enhanced their critical consciousness in ways that honored their Blackness and maleness.

Analytic Category 2: Intersectional identities. I found that there were both *macro* level and *micro* level "untold stories" about young Black men. Through examining several micro level stories, I was able to better understand the ways the scholars actively worked to disrupt "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) on a daily bases toward the goal of interrupting macro level discourses about young Black men. As with A LENs, these stories manifested through (de)humanization, (myths of) meritocracy, and refusal. However, this analytic category emphasized how the scholars were (a) constructing, (b) negotiating, and (c) embodying their intersectional identities on a daily basis. In this study, we see the micro level ways that young Black men are disrupting these single stories and enacting agency in nonviolent, thoughtful, and effective ways. The scholars made daily decisions about their intersectional identities. They negotiated the tensions between who they are and who they wanted to be. I provide evidence about the mental and performative work among and between the scholars toward this end. At the macro level, there is clear evidence that young Black men "are negatively stereotyped and profiled" in schools and within larger society. Overall, Black male scholars as demonstrated here, like anyone else, wanted to be seen, heard, and loved. They want to be humanized in schools and related academic spaces.

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[7] This dissertation took place during particularly difficult moments in American history. These difficult moments demonstrate that in U.S. society it is commonplace to kill young Black men and dehumanize them, even in their deaths. Because several Black men were murdered during

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the years of my dissertation project, I wanted to be able to historicize the urgency and necessity for this work. Most of the Black men who were murdered were unarmed. Most of the Black men and their families received no justice for their untimely deaths. The verdict of the Trayvon Martin murder trial was released while I was teaching the scholars in July 14, 2013 during my third summer of teaching scholars. This was during my data collection summer for my dissertation.

[8] During my 4th summer as an instructor in the WCL there were several untimely and callous deaths of Black men. To name a few, Eric Garner was murdered on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, NY (in my hometown of NYC). The verdict to *not indict* his murderer, Daniel Panteleo was released on December 3, 2014 while I was coding and analyzing findings about the scholars. Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, MO August 9, 2014 while I was preparing my research presentation for the International Conference on Urban Education (ICUE), which focused on the Dismantling the cumulative risks for young black men- toward a goal of helping teachers utilize culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches in secondary settings. He should have been in college, just like the scholars discussed in this dissertation. Unfortunately, he was murdered the weekend before he was scheduled to leave for college. Instead of getting a moving vehicle, his parents had to get a hearse instead. On November 22, 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by police officers who barely stopped their vehicle before they shot. Tamir died the following day. The verdict to *not indict* Darren Wilson (Michael Brown's murderer) was released on November 24, 2014 shortly after my return from the ICUE conference.

CHAPTER 5: Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives- A Catalyst for Unpacking Raced and Gendered Experiences of Academically High Performing Black Male Students

> *"Education is being used as a tool to give people false hope in the belief that [it]… can change your life for the better…My grades were important because they are what represent your effort in the classes, not how much you learned."* (Aaronwick- A LENs)
>
> *"I refuse to be a product of my environment… Education means an opportunity for me to show others and myself that it's possible to not be a dropout statistic. I want to be an associates, bachelors, masters, or doctorate statistic."* (Rajon-A LENs)
>
> *"It was undeniable that the schools believed we were nothing but criminals in the making and [they] decided to prepare us… I would hate to contribute to the problem, so I achieve the unexpected… being a scholar in anything I do."* (Shawn- A LENs)
>
> *"I think school is put in place to weed out children that are going to be successful in life [from] those kids that are not going to be successful in life… I can create many opportunities for others by using education…That is why I am in this program today; I am making the right decisions."*
> (Will A LENs)

These excerpts come from their Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives (A LENs), a layered assignment in my summer writing course in WCL. In these Artifactual LENs, the scholars constructed conceptually sophisticated and artfully intimate details about their experiences in education. Therefore, this work honors students' voices. The Artifactual LENs these young men wrote, the artifacts they chose to visually represent their narratives, as well as their written reflections (via email) and verbal discussions (via classroom talk and follow up interviews) about these artifacts, evidence how their critical consciousness' of their educational experiences compliment, contradict and get recycled within larger discourses on education, meritocracy, institutionalized racism and individual agency.

Their narratives are raced, gendered, and classed. In this analysis, I emphasize the raced and gendered aspects of their experiences. However, it is difficult to ignore socioeconomic class, as it is intricately intertwined, shapes and is shaped by their Black male lived experiences. Through their Artifactual LENs, the scholars shared how they see and experience the world, including their schools as young Black men, rather than as race-less or gender-less beings. Participating in the WCL writing course provided multiple spaces for the scholars to explore and express those experiences, especially through writing and dialogue. In this way, writing became a catalyst for unpacking the experiences of the scholars. Because writing was central to the ways the young Black men unpacked their educational narratives in the WCL writing course, writing functioned as a significant method of inquiry to name current realities and propose alternative realities. According to Valerie Kinloch (2010), "writing is a space where students can learn to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question values, establish points of view, and reflect on beliefs that may contradict other people's beliefs" (p. 44). The artifactual literacies education narratives provided such a space for the young men to engage in all of these aforementioned aspects of writing.

It would not do the young men's lived experiences any justice to merely categorize their schooling experiences in false binaries, such as "negative" or "positive." Rather, if I am to come close to any level of accuracy with understanding and representing their stories I had to offer their complex and conflicted interweaved narratives; thereby disrupting the single story about young Black men.

In this work, I attempted to honor my students as a *worthy witness* (Winn & Ubiles, 2011)[9] or as *a friend who fully understands* (Paris, 2011) to frame for *humanizing research* (Paris & Winn, 2014). "Portraiture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997; Tieken, 2013) affords me an entry point to offer a more representative story of these young men's lives because it is 'a genre of writing that allows me to blend the art and science of research.' Portraiture, according to Tieken, relies upon "thick description," (Geertz, 1973) upon a deep understanding of context, upon dialogue between "actor" and "portraitist." Furthermore, Tieken (2013) notes that portraiture requires explicit attention to positionality—not to remove a researcher's influence but, instead, to identify, understand, and balance this influence. These scholars (my research participants), who I was privileged to know and grow with, are rhetoricians in their own rights. The young men have valuable stories to tell and this was but one space (of many) where those stories are honored. Throughout the dissertation, I offer description and analysis in other spaces where I learned these valuable stories; here I focus on the A LENs.

In this chapter, I theorize about A LENs through an assignment in our writing class over the summer. Each of the young men wrote A LENs during WCL in the summer of 2013. I briefly describe the assignments and classroom activities leading up to the construction of their narratives. I then illuminate the themes *within* and *across* the artifact essays. Lastly, I demonstrate more explicitly how the artifactual narratives might inform us. That is, I share some of the meanings the scholars and I ascribe to these artifactual literacies education narratives by speaking to how they were used both within and beyond my summer class. For example, they used the A LENs to (1) author themselves or name particular identities and (2) they were also used as the foundation for their college admission essays. In the next section, I provide context for the scholars' A LENs assignment.

Context for Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives (A LENs)

In this section, I provide some context for how the assignment (that I analyzed) in the context of this chapter came about. There were several assignments leading up to the Artifactual

LENs. A LENs was a final project in the writing course. Throughout the course, the students read, wrote about, and engaged in dialogue about critical theory in education. A LENs was a layered project in that students had to construct a metaphor that described their educational narratives. I encouraged the scholars to reflect on how Paulo Friere (1970) constructed his "banking" metaphor and also to think about Lakoff and Johnson (2011), who argue that we always use metaphors to better understand reality. The scholars also had to create or buy a physical artifact that somehow represented their educational narrative experiences in school. On the last day of the WCL writing class, all of students engaged in a gallery walk. More specifically, they (1) displayed their hardcopy essays on tables for everyone to read (2) exhibited their physical artifact (described in the narrative) and (3) they also had a blank sheet of paper where fellow scholars could give positive and constructive feedback. All of the scholars visited one another's exhibitions. The program directors and counselors were also invited to see and experience the narratives of the scholars.

In my class, the scholars expressed being *introduced* to the ideas of critical consciousness raising (Freire, 1970) and critical pedagogy (Willis et al, 2008). After being exposed to critical theories in education and engaging in critical pedagogies within our classroom community (and throughout the WCL program), the young men expressed appreciation for being allowed to be themselves. They also jumped at opportunities to challenge, problematize, and deconstruct institutional discourses, especially concerning education. Reading, writing and openly dialoging about these concerns helped to raise their critical consciousness, which ultimately helped them to name and describe their own realities more completely. These experiences also (re)affirmed, and sometimes challenged, their own ideologies about the purposes and goals of education, and for whom. There was a positive and welcoming energy around the idea of being honest and vulnerable with their educational narratives. For example, Rajon notes, “I’ve never put these experiences into my work and I want to thank you for that. This whole experience has been truly great for me.” Shawn expressed a similar sentiment,

> “This was a great experience. It showed me how people can actually take their time out of their day to help inner city or suburban area children. I've never done anything like this. This one project I can say flashed my light back on my education because I was starting to doubt the schooling system, and was losing interest in school.”

Aaronwick said,

> “I thought the project was great, it was cool seeing other people get so move from each other’s writing. Also all the positivity that flowed through the room made even the comments of improvement better to take in…I see how some people put pieces of themselves into their writing to take that extra step to be personal and it has shown me how I can improve and do the same.”

Will shared,

> “I never did anything like this before. It was a lot better than having everyone go in front of the class and read their paper out loud. I know everyone worked hard and everyone’s paper was great. I learned a lot of things while doing this paper. I know this experience will make me a better writer…”

Overall, the energy around the project was positive. Their comments speak to the growth they had, both personally and academically, as writers. Accessing parts of themselves that they had not previously been asked to access created invaluable spaces of vulnerability, critical awareness, and growth. What a missed opportunity! These young men had gone through most of their K-12 schooling experiences and had never been asked to critically write/reflect of their positionality as human beings and to consider how that affects the ways they engage in and experience education. They all noted how this experience was personally moving, but what added complexity and richness to their understanding of themselves/their experiences was getting a space to learn about others in a more authentic way (gallery walk). To reiterate Will's words, he said it was "a lot better than having everyone go in front of the class and read their paper out loud." Aaronwick noted that creating our classroom community up front made accepting critiques about how to improve his academic writing easier to "take in." These sentiments were echoed by each of the young men. Hearing from the scholars about the impact this assignment had on them speaks to the need for teachers to create opportunities for young people to be intentional about creating genuine relationships with students.

Toward a Theory of Artifactual Literacies Education Narratives (A LENs)

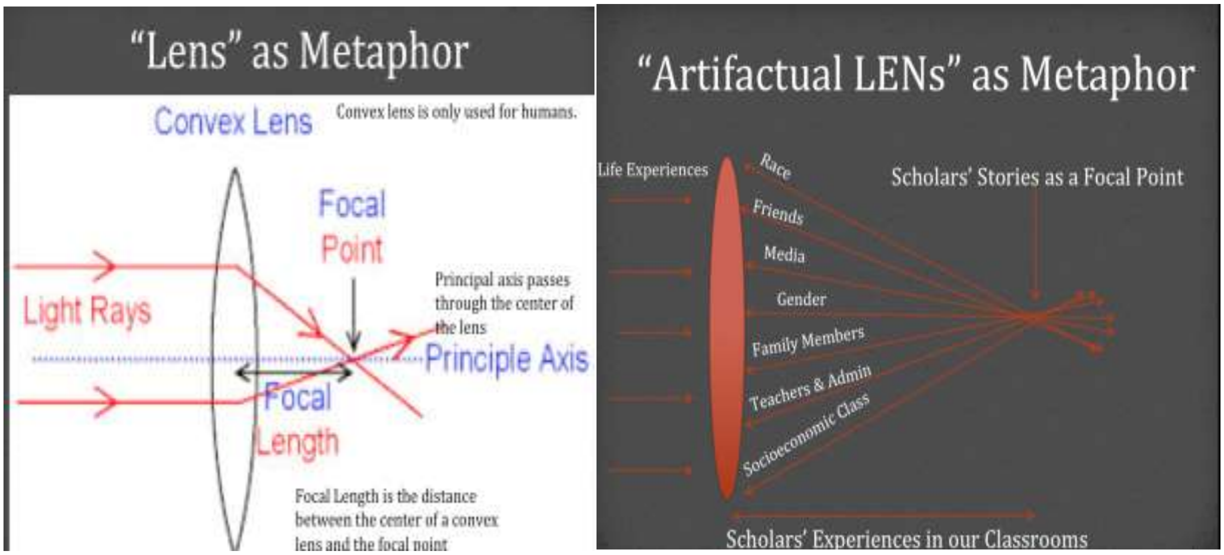
Pahl and Rowsell (2010) introduce a theory about the significance of artifacts in mediating our everyday literacies. They argue that artifacts are particularly significant because they "provide a platform from which students can access literate identities" and "open up worlds that bring in new identities" (p. 64). Artifacts are heavy with meaning and when students select artifacts to represent their experiences, it creates a powerful opportunity to listen and understand what students value. More specifically, they note artifacts "offer insights about everyday life, and provide an understanding of culture, family, and community" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 64). They note that an artifact (or object, used interchangeably) has the following qualities:

- Has physical features that makes it distinct, such as color or texture
- Is created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language, or worn
- Embodies people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences
- Is valued or made by a meaning maker in a particular context

In crafting the Artifactual LENs project for the scholars, I wanted acknowledge who they were as people and to better understand how that shaped and was shaped by their experiences in education, especially in spaces where they were expected to craft texts. "Artifactual literacy acknowledges that everyone has a story to tell, and they bring that story into their learning…[it] also sees literacies as being multimodal and asks educators to think about literacy teaching as material and situated" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 3). The word "literacies" signals that literacy is multiple, diverse, and multilingual and spans domains of practice, from home to school to community, and in each domain there are different literacies (Collins & Blot, 2009; Gee, 1990; Guzzetti, 2013; Kinloch, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). These literacies are artifactual and link to printed texts... texts to mean books, writing or physical manifestations of ideas (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010).

Texts are representations that are inscribed- written or drawn- as opposed to artifacts that are found, created, and made for a purpose; texts have a representational quality (Collins & Blot, 2009; Kirkland, 2009; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). "Schools tend to be places where texts get made, such as writings, drawings, collages, models or films... Texts can be both multimodal and have material qualities, since they contain words and images and these both work together to create meaning (Kress, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996)" as cited in Pahl & Rowsell (2010). In pairing the artifacts with the scholars' writing, I hoped to create opportunities for them to utilize their critical literacies in multimodal ways. As such, one is forced to contemplate, 'what might this writing show evidence of?' Their artifacts and writing about those artifacts then became a lens or a way of seeing into the focal point of their understandings of their critical consciousness about and for themselves, their schools, and their communities.

A LENs provided multiple ways for the scholars to conceptualize their schooling experiences. Writing about these experiences in critical ways helped them to name, problematize, and re-imagine new ways of being. The artifacts themselves were thick with hidden stories and meanings, which provided interesting insights about the ways the scholars saw their situations and possible selves. Asking the scholars to reflect on the experience in the moment of the A LENs gallery walk provided a window into some of the rawest emotions they had about the project. In the classroom, people were able to feed off of the energy of their fellow scholars.


"Lens" as Metaphor
Convex Lens
Focal Point
Light Rays
Principle Axis
Focal Length
"Artifactual LENs" as Metaphor
Life Experiences
Race
Friends
Media
Gender
Family Members
Teachers & Admin
Socioeconomic Class
Scholars' Stories as a Focal Point
Scholars' Experiences in our Classrooms

Convex lens is only used for humans.

Principal axis passes through the center of the lens

Focal Length is the distance between the center of a convex lens and the focal point

Figure 5.1. Organizing Methodological Frameworks

I also interviewed the scholars days after the project to inquire about why they chose particular metaphors and artifacts to represent their experiences. In this way, the scholars were able to speak about and provide context for the origins of their artifacts. Overall, this writing and reflection on the writing came in multiple forms. Because of the multiple entry points into the A LENs, I was able to triangulate their educational narratives in meaningful ways. What I believe came to the surface were three themes in their writings: (1) Meritocracy stories and myths, (2) (de)humanizing stories and (3) refusal stories. These stories were articulated through the (a) content, (b) process, and (c) impact of their projects.

Table 5.1

Artifactual LENs Themes and Significance

(**De)humanizing Stories**	• (Lacking) recognition of full range of humanity • (Lacking) acknowledgment of one's human rights • (Lacking) opportunity to develop critical consciousness
Refusal Stories	• Refusing to be a negative statistic • Refusing to be agency-less or victim • Refusing to be silent
(Myth of) Meritocracy Stories	• (Not) Believing in merit-based ideologies • (Not) Engaging in merit-based practices or performances • (Not) Acknowledging merit-based agency (structure and/or individual)

I now provide examples from each scholar that speaks to these aforementioned themes from their Artifactual LENs using Critical Narrative Analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014a; Souto-Manning, 2014b). Souto-Manning explains that CNA effectively examines *both* the institutional and personal discourses of narratives in ways that help us to understand how they shape and are shaped by one another. As such, she notes there are two primary components of CNA are grammatical agency and framing agency.

> Grammatical agency is agency portrayed linguistically by the use of subject plus action verb. When one portrays oneself as an actor in the sentence (subject) as opposed to a passive recipient of the action (object), grammatical agency is displayed. Framing agency is the narrator's character alignment with normative and situated morals (p.208).

"If You Don't Use It, You Lose It"

> *"Education is being used as a tool to give people false hope in the belief that [it]… can change your life for the better…My grades were important because they are what represent your effort in the classes, not how much you learned."* (Aaronwick Munn)

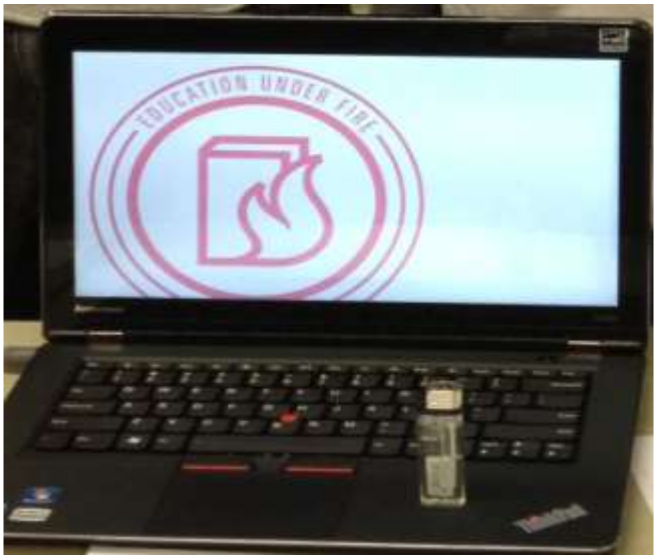


Figure 5.2. "If You Don't Use It, You Lose It" Artifact Picture. *Photo of scholar Aaronwick's project, taken July 24, 2013 by Sakeena Everett.*

Aaronwick's essay was called "If You Don't Use It, You Lose It." He chose to represent his work with a translucent lighter. Aaronwick opened his essay by questioning the reader, "What is education if you don't use it for a tool for success? Is it just solely for the purpose of using it later on in life or can someone just learn for the fun of it?" By opening his Artifactual LENs with this question, I believe he positions himself as *knowing* something or being agentive in understanding the purpose of education. This was particularly significant because Aaronwick did not start at this place in his writing or thinking in the beginning of the summer. Aaronwick and I both acknowledged this as a personal area of growth for himself in the summer program. Learning to question, was an important accomplishment for Aaronwick. The excerpt from our first interview during WCL below illustrates this point.

> "…[W]hen we read the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* I didn't think that it was another way of teaching besides the banking method. I just thought that like if you give it to people, they they supposed to soak it in. Then they gon' take what they gon' take out of it and they put it on the test…so um for me that helped me learn that I *can* ask questions… even if I don't feel like they [are] the best questions um or I'm a feel like…I might not get the answers that I wanna get… [B]ut that's just part of the you know, asking questions… you may not get the answer you want

Reading, writing and dialoging about critical theory in my summer writing class helped Aaronwick realize that he *can* ask questions, "even if they not [are] the best questions." He expressed that felt he learned about various teaching strategies and how to name them (i.e. "banking" and "problem posing"). The nature of our classroom community helped us to establish some "intellectual and social safety" (Lee, 2006) for Aaronwick. Engaging in critical dialogue about the text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* helped him reposition himself toward a more agentive stance where he felt like "I can ask questions…even if I don't feel like they the best questions…but that's just part of the you know asking questions…" Here one can see how reading critical theory and unpacking it with classmates affirmed and fueled his agency in taking intellectual risks. An engaged pedagogical approach hence created an opportunity for this young man to not only consider alternative perspectives, but to challenge and problematize those perspectives through dialogue, critical writing, and in reflection about the writing process.

As you can see from Aaronwick's artifact, he provided a translucent lighter. According to Aaronwick, this lighter represents an opportunity to "let the fire of your knowledge ignite" in successful ways. For Aaronwick, the lighter has "fire" in it, but "if you don't use it, you lose it." Furthermore, Aaronwick offered two main arguments in his Artifactual LENs. First, he believed "that the system of education is fixed to keep people from succeeding and really achieving their ultimate goals." Aaronwick described, "education is a tool" which can be used for "success" or "false hope." His second argument asserts, predominately White institutionalized structures within education, challenged him to refuse negative stereotypes of Black students. Aaronwick's Artifactual LENs unveils his individual experiences and beliefs about education as well as identifies several contradictions and inconsistencies within the institution of education. He then problematized them and challenged them, thereby engaging in action. Throughout this discussion was a complex weave of his micro level or personal everyday education narrative experiences and macro level institutional discourses on education. These co-existing and often competing purposes of education shed some light on privilege and access to opportunities for Aaronwick and for the others scholars in general.

"The system of education is fixed". Aaronwick was troubled by ideas of meritocracy through what I am calling a "(myth of) meritocracy story. He "believe[d] that the system of education is fixed to keep people from succeeding and really achieving their ultimate goals" (A LENs essay). However, he noted that he also believes that if individuals, "apply effort and time into education and get opportunities to succeed" the results for that individual could be life changing. According to Aaronwick, "Schools are facilities that house and represent this concept of hope" for students and their families. Schools are founded on the idea of meritocracy, which he defined in his essay as "people get power because of how hard they work." In other words, they are rewarded for their efforts. Hope manifests itself by convincing students and their families that going to school will "be worth it in the long run." He extended this argument by noting that schools are divided into two main categories "urban" and "suburban." On the one hand, suburban schools are characterized by offering the "best education as possible…[and] also more opportunities." On the other hand, he described urban schools as "trap" where students are offered few "chances to succeed." This was why his parents utilized their agency to move him "out to the suburbs" when he was in the fourth grade, so that he might be able to maximize his opportunities for success.

His narrative became more layered when he intentionally mentioned that for him, participating in "schools have been an obligation, not a choice. Even in terms of college, it was never a question on *if* I was going, it was *where* I was going" (emphasis added). By deliberately mentioning his complex relationship with schools, he entangled his own agency and the agency of parents in forcing him to go to school, which as an institution provides "false hope" for some students. Because his parents forced him to go to school and more specifically decided which school he would attend, he was framing his agency within a set of situated morals; listening to his parents and going to school out of obligation.

Because his parents wanted particular college options available to Aaronwick, he explained in his narrative that they moved him from a large urban school district to a smaller suburban one where he could get the "best education possible" with more "opportunities." He went to on to explain, "You have to be given or obtain opportunities in which you can use your years of education to your advantage." His rhetoric of "best education possible" and gaining important "opportunities" in the suburbs are interwoven within larger institutional discourses of schooling.

"Education is a tool" which can be used for "success" or "false hope," but you must be "given opportunities" and "use them to your advantage" if you want a better chance at experiencing the "success end of the "tool." Either way, Aaronwick went on to explain, there are no "guarantees" in acquiring formal education. Because of the changing times, " college doesn't guarantee you a job anymore" and he mentioned several times that he knows of people without formal education who are just as successful as those without formal education. Here, he raises both a theoretical and a practical concern for many people today. In this way, he dealt with the issues of *access* and *privilege* to certain educational and later career opportunities. He went on to question if it is "worth it" to go through the "trials and tribulations of college and other forms of education" if there is no guarantee of a prosperous future. He raised this question, while also participating in the institutional happenings of school. There is an interesting shift in his language that signals an inconsistency. More specifically, he explained that "you have to be given OR obtain opportunities" (emphasis added) in order to trade one's education for material success in the future. Do you have to be *given* opportunities or can you just *obtain* them if you want to? If opportunities were easily obtainable, then his parents would not have to uproot their family from the urban community where he was born and relocate to the suburban community where he attended high school.

Aaronwick hedged a bit in the aforementioned phrase, but he later committed to the idea that there is an unequal distribution of opportunities and advantages, especially between those in urban and suburban schools, according to Aaronwick. He illustrated this point by saying,

> "I can't help but to think about the people who aren't as privileged as me and are still trapped inside urban schools. Will they get as many chances to succeed as me? Or even half as many? Their [sic] getting punished because they attend a less fortunate school and are fed this ideal concept that education is the ticket to a better life."

Aaronwick believed there is a clear divide between schools in urban and urban communities. This divide is intricately entangled in race, culture, socioeconomic class.

"I didn't want to just be that Black kid who was a trouble maker". Aaronwick spoke to his A LENs as a Black young man in predominantly white schools in what I refer to as a "refusal story" Aaronwick thought of himself as a good student. In fact, he declared that, "My grades [are] important because they are what represent your effort in the classes, now how much you learned." Here, Aaronwick returned to the idea raised in the opening line of education narrative about the distinction between schooling and learning. According to Aaronwick, grades do not represent learning. Rather, they represent one's effort in the schooling process. Aaronwick reported controlling his efforts (grades). That is, he chose not to put in much effort up until high school. He mainly got B's because school came easy for him and he chose not to study. When he wanted to do better, starting in high school, he began studying and aiming for A's. This narrative became complicated when he spoke to some of the reasons he started aiming for A's.

> "Going to a predominantly white high school also challenged me to be better than the image that many people had of me. I didn't want to just be that black kid who was a troublemaker or acted out for attention. I wanted to be higher than many of my white counterparts so I worked twice as hard as most of them"

This revealed a complex motivation for succeeding. Aaronwick had a point to prove. White people in his school had negative images of Black kids and he did not want to be a part of those images. He spoke about the need to be better than his white counterparts because he didn't want to be the Black kid who did not take care of business. Being better than his white counterparts, according to his account, meant that he needed to overcome his greatest obstacle, "pride." He did not want to ask for help and get tutoring, but realized that by being "open in receiving help" was the only way that he could get ahead. In this way, he recognized there was a difference between students' access and advantage to opportunities. Throughout this transition from middle school to high school, he learned that people learned "at different paces and through different teaching techniques." This awareness helped him to discover is "own way of learning."

“Don’t Get Caught Up in Life”

> *“I refuse to be a product of my environment… Education means an opportunity for me to show others and myself that it’s possible to not be a dropout statistic. I want to be an associates, bachelors, masters, or doctorate statistic.”*
> (Rajon Thompson)

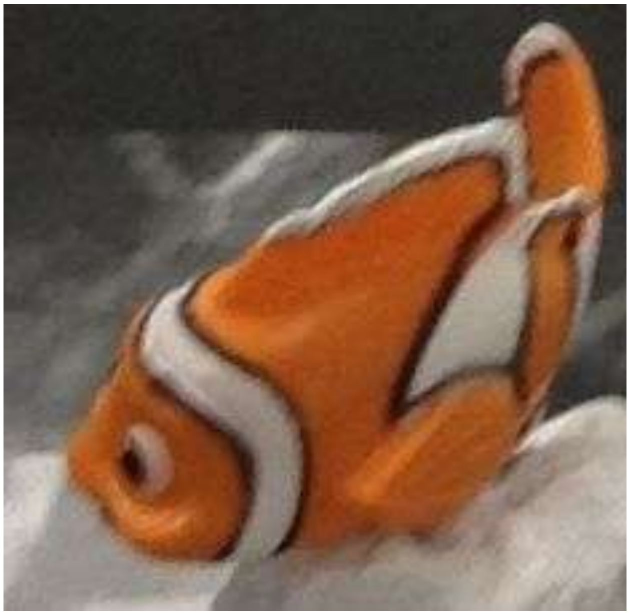


Figure 5.3. “Don’t Get Caught Up in Life” Artifact Picture. *Photo of scholar Rajon’s project, taken July 24, 2013 by Sakeena Everett.*

Rajon’s essay was called “Don’t Get Caught Up in Life.” Rajon printed out an image of a fishnet and used a plastic orange, white and black clownfish. In “Don’t Get Caught Up In Life,” Rajon chose to use a picture of Marlin, an overprotective father from the 2003 Disney Pixar film *Finding Nemo*. In Rajon’s picture (figure 5.2), Marlin is on one side of a large fishnet, while the members from his hometown (Great Barrier Reef) are featured on the opposite side of the fishnet. The fishnet symbolized the physical separation that Marlin had to undergo in order to pursue the thing he desired the most. Marlin informed the community members that he needed to leave their hometown in order to search for Nemo (his son), who was abducted. In the movie, Marlin had reason to believe that Nemo had been taken to Sydney, Australia. As Marlin left the community, there was no way for him to anticipate the journey ahead of him. However, his love for his son motivated him to endure the unforeseen risks until he successfully brought Nemo home.

Rajon's A LENs made two main arguments: (1) Education is a ticket toward success or a "worry" free life. In other words, life without educational attainment gets people "caught up" in lives plagued by poverty, violence, and imprisonment. Uneven distribution of resources make some students "appear smarter" than other students and (2) words of encouragement do not motivate him to succeed academically. Rather, his observations and lived experiences from his close friends and relatives are what motivate him to succeed academically.

"Education is a ticket toward success or a 'worry free' life". From his Artifactual LENs, Rajon grew up in environments where poverty and violence were commonplace. More specifically, he asserted, "Throughout my 17 years of life I've watched the people around me get caught up in a variety of things… People became victims to the many things that life that set you back. People have been caught up in drug dealing, gang banging, and lack of education." I refer to this section of his Artifactual LENs as a (myth of) meritocracy story. In his short life thus far, he spoke vividly about why he exercised his individual agency to pursue education. Through his LENs, he observed:

> Some of my relatives haven't graduated high school so they work 10 hours a day for 10 dollars an hour to support themselves and the 3 kids they have. Some are still living with their parents wishing they would've paid attention in school and not cut class with their unsuccessful friends living just like them.

Rajon noticed a pattern among his relatives and friends: they had low education attainment, made minimum wages, cycled in and out of the prison system, and they spent time with like-minded people. He characterized these traits as "unsuccessful." He sought to reposition his reality by taking agency to be “different.” Different for Rajon meant “making education an answer to all of his problems” and pursuing an academic career in college. Therefore, he believed that if he focused on school, he would be rewarded for his efforts with a “worry free” life. According to Rajon, a “worry free” life meant that he would “live comfortably without worrying about when bills are due and what I can and can’t afford to do.” It also meant creating a new space for himself where he no longer was “having to look over my shoulders the majority of the time I walk and dodging bullets… I never had a dream to be a basketball player or a fireman. I just want to make it out.” Making it out consisted of graduating from high school and pursuing a college education. To illustrate the significance of graduating from high school for Rajon, he included a brief vignette:

> Like the dropout rate is real, an intelligent female I’ve basically grown up with doesn’t attend school because she has a newborn. I went from competing with her for better grades to not seeing her in school at all.

Because of the way Rajon grew up, he said he “lost family and friends to gang related murders and to prison because of crimes and homicides.” By staying in school and avoiding gang violence, he was optimistic about a “worry free” life for himself and his future family. He believed he had some individual agency to make this happen.

Rajon believed that if he focused on education he would be successful, which he explicitly defines as living “comfortably without worrying about when bills are due and what I can’t afford to do…[and getting] legit [money]. “Legit” money refers to money that is not acquired through selling drugs in the community and/or stealing from people.

“Their words of encouragement don’t motivate me”. Rajon described how his close family members and friends tried to motivate him to succeed through their stories of struggle. When he reflected on his personal struggles with growing up in a single parent low-income household in an urban community and how he intentionally avoided all of the temptations to get "fast money" by selling drugs or participating in gang activities, he realized that their stories didn't motivate him to be an academically high performing student. Rather, he was motivated to succeed because of his adamant refusal to be another "statistic." As such, I call this a refusal story. Rajon commented in our initial formal interview that he knew that society has "low expectations" for young Black men. As such, he "refuse[d] to live up to the stereotypes" that people have for young Black men.

He also cited research literature in his paper from Gary Orfield (1996) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) about disparities in funding, high school graduation, and dropout rates to make the argument, "Just because the value of my education means less to the world, doesn't mean it means less to me. Education is the most valuable thing that I have possession of and that's all that matters" (Rajon, 2013). In other words, he purposefully chose to be an academically high performing Black male student. In this way, Rajon deliberately disrupted "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009) of common deficit tropes about young Black men from urban contexts. Rajon actively owned his agency in rejecting society's low expectations for young Black men. In "Don't Get Caught Up in Life", Rajon described education as a ticket out of his community. He spoke about education as an opportunity to show others that it is possible to be from Quahog and not be a bad statistic. For Rajon, education was framed within an institution of poverty and possibility. Yet, it also functioned as a pathway toward success. He positioned himself as agentive by noting, "I refuse to be a product of my environment. I've faced challenges and I've overcome everyone so far." Rajon explained in his A LENs, "Close friends and relatives respected my decision and me being in control of my life. They appreciate the fact that I didn't want to be involved in it, so drugs have never been a problem to me." Here, Rajon positioned himself as the leader of his life by rejecting a lifestyle that involves crime, gangs and poverty, a normalcy in his community. Furthermore, Rajon noted:

> …I sat back and thought about my life experiences and what not and all the problems I've avoided to be where I am. I realized how I've never got caught up in any situations I couldn't get myself out of…

Through his framing agency (alignment with normative and situated morals), he acknowledged that he has avoided "problems" in his life. At the same time, Rajon displayed grammatical agency because he was taking responsibility for *not* getting caught up in negative situations that would have stifled his high academic performance in school. Therefore, Rajon expressed that constructing the writing assignment for our class provided an avenue for him to author his agency in his personal narrative.

According to Rajon's account, this was the longest paper he had ever written. I used his initial reaction to the assignment as an entry point for conversations about the ways assignments can and do bring certain pieces of our vulnerability to the table in transformative ways. When we reflect on Rajon's words, "I've made education an answer to all of my life problems," we can acknowledge and better understand the intentionality in his pursuit of high academic performance. Instead of attacking the way he articulated himself, my approach was instead to help him to let his thoughts "flow." As he began to let his ideas flow, he positioned himself as the subject rather than the object of his circumstance. By engaging in a "dialogic spiral" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) with Rajon about his A LENs, we also facilitated a meaningful assignment, which later turned into his college admissions essay for STU and other colleges/universities. This scholar spoke to his experience through taking agency to authoring his own text in meaningful ways.

"Incarcerated Students"

> *It was undeniable that the schools believed we were nothing but criminals in the making and [they] decided to prepare us… I would hate to contribute to the problem, so I achieve the unexpected… being a scholar in anything I do* (Shawn Alexander)

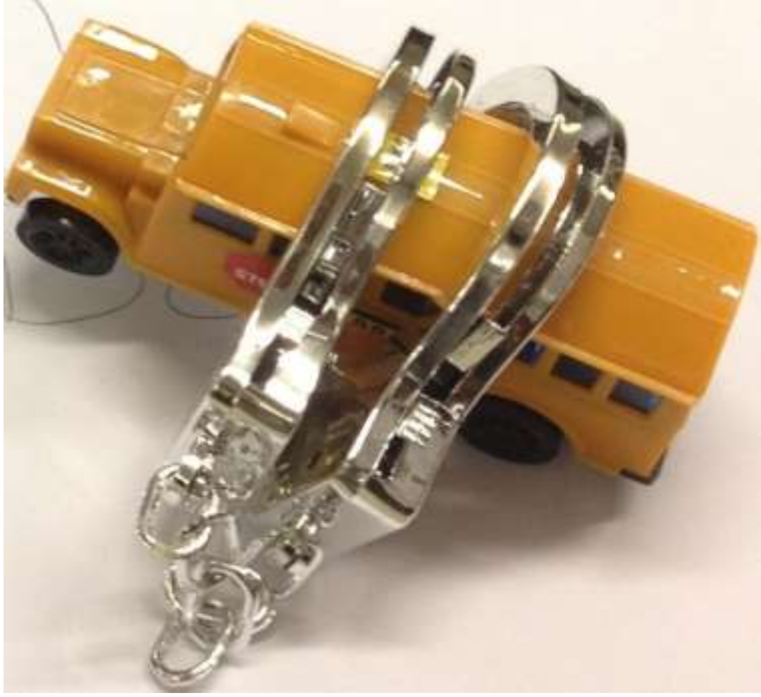


Figure 5.4. "Incarcerated Students" Artifact Picture. *Photo of scholar Shawn's project, taken July 24, 2013 by Sakeena Everett.*

Shawn's essay was called "Incarcerated Students" and he used a chilling image of a plastic yellow school bus with a pair of silver handcuffs wrapped around the school bus to represent his essay. In Shawn's A LENs, he critically and artfully utilized irony, sarcasm, imagery, and strategic repetition to expose his personal experiences about how students in urban schools become criminalized. Shawn actively critiqued educational systems and how he was treated like a criminal in a school building since the sixth grade, which continued through high school. The school bus represented the "system of education" and the handcuffs represented the surveillance or criminalization of students, especially urban students. According to Shawn's interview after he wrote his Artifactual LENs,

> So the handcuffs around the school bus had in mind… kids being incarcerated, but not knowing. I put the handcuffs over the school bus because you know. It was kind of like, I don't really know how to explain it, but like you don't see it. You don't feel it…it's like we're oblivious I would say to the stuff that is happening. You know these kids are in prison… they're learning in the education system, but you know it's levels to it…

Shawn made three powerful arguments in his artifactual literacies education narrative: (1) investment in schools is a society's "most direct way" to show what a society values for its future, (2) schools in urban communities invest more in surveillance equipment than in school supplies. Therefore, students who attend urban schools are treated like "criminals" when they attend schools with heavy surveillance. This type of dehumanizing treatment, gives urban student "discomfort" and (3) "teachers don't have to give you knowledge in order for you to learn." In this way, his narrative used an effective rhetorical strategy. By speaking about his personal experiences of "walk[ing] through a correctional center everyday and not a school" he was our raising awareness (as the reader) about a larger concern of institutional racism that tends to disproportionately negatively affects the schooling experiences of Black and Latino youth.

Investment in schools is society's "most direct way" to show priorities. I believe that Shawn was disrupting our notion of meritocracy by demonstrating that institutional racism sifts and sorts students into particular racially and academically segregated "levels." This is a (myth of) meritocracy story. On the on hand, Shawn described that his school receives positive press because his school has a track record for graduating large proportions of its students. When I asked him to tell me more about his school he said, "I would say it has 'urban like tendencies,' but my school has great funding." Furthermore, "people that see these young African American young men and they want to invest inside their lives…" and his school received donations of "computers." Shawn's school also had "kind of suburban kind of title because… they take us on these trips, these college tours. All expenses, like they pay it… you know we don't have to pay for anything." Shawn was careful to note "the neighborhood [where his school is located] is definitely urban…and so it's in like the first real ghettos of Urbantown' (pseudonym). Shawn had to spend some more time here complicating his notion of "urban" and "suburban." He associated "urban" with ghetto and "suburban" with access to resources which created an interesting positioning of his school as definitely being in urban school neighborhood, but have suburban resources. It revealed that perhaps those of us who study education are not being as nuanced as we can and should be when we refer to urban and suburban spaces. What is being left to unpack then is a code or a proxy for race and socioeconomic class concerns.

To illustrate the currency that his school had, he reported in our interview, "so even when I put my school on the application it's an automatic kind of incentive to a college" to accept him. He cautioned that colleges gladly accept him "not knowing what goes on inside the school." In his A LENs, Shawn explained, "but our curriculum wasn't rigorous, so we could all succeed." That is, he desired a curriculum that would afford him an opportunity to "compete on an education level with other races of students." He shared that he felt like he needed to go outside of his school to receive academically rigorous work. He described the curriculum as "banking education" as cited in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

Urban schools invest more in surveillance equipment than in school supplies. Shawn framed the ways many students from urban schools experience the school-to-prison pipeline on a day-to-day basis. This is an example of (de)humanizing story. For Shawn, education paralleled prisons for urban students. This was undoubtedly a (de)humanizing effort by urban schools for its urban students. To illustrate this point Shawn noted:

> Students who attend urban schools in urban areas are given discomfort. They come to school and have to be patted down; empty their pockets, walk through metal detectors, put their book bags through scanners, and attend every class with cameras staring them in the face. That's enough to make a kid not want to come to school. Although the schools believe they're helping they are turning our schools into prisons, by eyeing our every move, teaching us what they feel is necessary and implementing school lock downs.

Shawn grammatically positioned "students who attend urban schools" using passive verb usage, thus linguistically constructing his identity as an object as opposed to a subject in the sentence- "are given discomfort." He framed his illustration by detailing the ways urban students experience criminalization on a daily basis in school, a place that is supposed to be helping them. Rather, they are hurting the students by "eyeing our every move, teaching us what they feel is necessary, and implementing school lock downs." That is, students are positioned as objects in the actions of schools' actions against students who attend these urban schools. This indicates agency on the part of schools as an institutional entity to make student who attend urban schools perform and exist in particular ways. The "discomfort" the students feel make them not want to attend school, but they do it anyway because they feel obligated to do so. He goes on to describe the progression of surveillance:

> First they used metal detectors, then a scanning wand, after that, students had to take off their hoodies, coats, or shoes at the front door… it felt like the next week my school wouldn't have minded purchasing an x-ray. It felt as if the school took no time to buy school supplies.

By explaining the progression of surveillance at his school and utilizing sarcasm about the school purchasing an "x-ray," yet forfeiting time to purchase school supplies, was a critique of his school's daily operations. He extended this critique by problematizing that, "It was undeniable that the schools believed we were nothing but criminals in the making… [yet] the curriculum wasn't rigorous, so we could all succeed." As the surveillance in Shawn's school progressed, then "lock downs became the norm." According to Shawn, lock downs were a mechanism borrowed from prisons to "control the movement of inmates." He wrote that lock downs in his school were implemented to control the movement of students. These lock downs would last from a few minutes to a few hours (sometimes the whole school day); to which he asked the following question, "How do you take education away from students for hours at a time then expect them to cooperate?" He expressed frustration about how his school kept "eyes on us at all times… and we go somewhere it's a camera every hallway… Actually, you have cameras in the bathrooms in the corner, but you can't see inside the stalls." Ironically, A LENs was used here to capture the students' daily moves, but in (de)humanizing ways.

"Teachers don't have to give you knowledge in order for you to learn". By constructing this narrative, Shawn was also grammatically positioning himself as "knowing" or "understanding" how systems of education operate to harm students who attend urban schools. This was a manifestation of Shawn's refusal story to "contribute to the problem, so [he] achieve[s] the unexpected." In other words, he refused to be agency-less or voice-less in the (de)humanizing processes of urban schooling that he experienced, especially since "people of color aren't meant to succeed in these urban areas, [he's] going to do it." He took this notion a bit further by shifting his agency later in the essay to note:

> My experiences with education make me want to become a teacher. That way I could use my education to influence the people around me. I would purposely work in an urban school in an urban community. I want to show students it is possible no matter where you come from... I want them to know sports aren't the only way [out of their current situation]…I feel I can help kids realize teachers don't have to give you knowledge in order for you to learn… being able to make it noticeable that there are people who

> want these kids to fail. Just like in prison these guards or leaders are implemented to show the prisoners they aren't humans and jail is where [people in prison] belong. I know I can use education to better myself.

Shawn's negative experiences in school urged him to become a teacher. He wanted to use his knowledge to bring awareness or consciousness in critical ways to students who attend urban schools. That is, he wanted to let them know that some people want them to fail and they do not have to rely on teachers to acquire knowledge. Further, sports is not the only way that one can "make it" out of urban schools and communities. People can use their knowledge to help others. "As a student, my knowledge expands because of things I do personally" outside of school. In this way, Shawn was clear in the fact that acquiring knowledge was not equal to getting an education.

"Build Up Your Education"

> *"I think school is put in place to weed out children that are going to be successful in life [from] those kids that are not going to be successful in life… I can create many opportunities for others by using education…That is why I am in this program today; I am making the right decisions."*
> (Will Allen)

Will's A LENs was titled, "Build your Education," which he intended to represent with a skyscraper. However, due to lack of availability of a skyscraper model at the time of the program, he improvised and used a Jenga building block set. He described his metaphor of education as a skyscraper because of the foundational support needed in the construction process, which contributes to the "integrity and safety" of the building. Likewise, the support structures that are offered in schools should provide opportunities for students in schools.

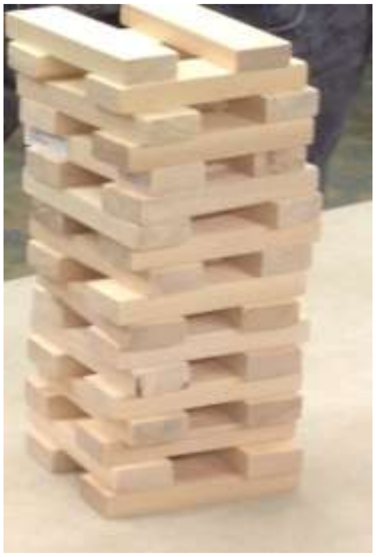


Figure 5.5. "Build Up Your Education" Artifact Picture. *Photo of scholar Will's project, taken July 24, 2013 by Sakeena Everett.*

Will provided at least three main arguments in his A LENs. First, Will argued schools provide what he calls "foundations" for students. Will asserted knowing that the educational system is set up to weed out students can also position individuals to make the "right decisions" to end up in the successful track, as opposed to the unsuccessful track. Lastly, Will claimed that going to urban schools had its disadvantages of (a) unequal resources, (b) racially segregated communities, and (c) high teacher attrition.

Schools as "Foundations". According to Will, people go to school in order to lay the groundwork for their future success; schools provide what he calls "foundations" for students. These foundations, according to Will, build toward their success in life. Furthermore, he argued that education is about expanding one's knowledge and taking advantage of opportunities by "making the right decisions." He complicated this argument by noting that while people have individual agency to make "good decisions", schools are "put in place" to sort children into two primary categories: (1) those who will succeed and (2) and those who will not succeed. This "weeding out" process entails placing students in "uninteresting" environments, which he also refers to as “banking” education environments. This is a (myth of) meritocracy story. Will provides a concrete example of ways he is beginning to enact *problem posing* (Freire, 1970) strategies in his teaching. Will reported that in his time working with the “Liberty Schools” he was assigned to work with third through fifth graders. While he was there, he claimed to “get them excited about school” even though they come “urban education environments.”

“Going to urban schools has disadvantages”. Going to urban schools has its disadvantages of (a) unequal resources, (b) racially segregated communities, and (c) high teacher attrition, according to Will. This is an example of a (de)humanizing story. Within the unequal resources, he specifically named “school funding” as an issue. He took concern with the schools that were currently funded through “property taxes.” In his city, Urbantown, he reported that he believed “racially segregated neighborhoods” are designed to “disadvantage African Americans and Latinos.” These disadvantages persist because African Americans and Latinos are denied access to fair and equitable educational access opportunities.

According to Will’s A LENs, urban schools have high teacher attrition because of “violent students” who come from violent neighborhoods/communities. Because he attended a single-sex high school, he wrote “males tend to be wilder when there are no females around.” This “wild” behavior leads to “classroom management issues” and ultimately disrupts the learning environment. When the learning environment is disrupted, “some students miss an opportunity to learn.” Will’s grammatical framing here was interesting because he positions structural inequalities (e.g. funding and segregated neighborhoods) as the core of the issue. Yet, he was also framing Black males in particular (his Black male single-sex school) as “wild” and contributing to their own demise in education. Here, it seemed as if the institutional discourse about failing urban schools was influencing how he perceived his peers.

Will pointed out, “Going to an urban school has its disadvantages because an urban school does not have the same resources as schools in the suburbs.” He further problematized the way school funding is decided through

> …federal, state, and local sources… [noting that] this is extremely unfair because we all should have equal education. Most of the urban areas are mostly African Americans and Latinos. I believe this system is holding African Americans and Latinos back from being equally educated [with] Whites.

Will exposed institutional racism as he experienced it in his hometown city. He said the neighborhoods and schools in Urbantown were “extremely segregated. This played a role in how students were being taught in classrooms. “I go to an all African American school. The resources we have might not be as good as those that go a high school in a suburb.” As such, Will framed institutional racism as shaping his schooling experiences. He disclosed that he is aware of the ways neighborhoods and schools are systematically segregated and resourced. One suggestion that Will offered as a way that schools work to include some students and exclude other students is by the normalcy of “banking systems” of teaching, whereby students learn “passive[ly].” Like Freire (1970), Will was a proponent of “problem posing systems” of education where students are taught to take agency in their own learning. “If this system was put in place, I know more students would enjoy going to school” he indicated. Will argued in his A LENs that creating learning spaces in school that are “boring” only work to systematically discourage students from learning and it makes students not what to go to school. However, with a problem posing approach, students would actually enjoy learning new things. “Education, to me, is about expanding your knowledge” and current urban schooling systems, according to Will, do not prioritize the expansion of student knowledge.

In this way, Will framed situated institutional goals and demands and showed how those goals might influence one's daily decisions. Will grammatically positioned himself as having individual agency to "make the right decisions" in a system that is designed to weed students out. Knowing that the educational system is set up to weed students out can also position individuals to make "right decisions" to end up in the successful track, as opposed to the unsuccessful track. Individuals can create opportunities for themselves by using education to help others. For example, Will's mother switched his school (exercising her agency) and thereby changed his academic trajectory and immediate outcomes in school.

"I am making the right decisions". Will concluded by noting that he believed we can all have successful educational experiences and "make it to the top," but we may need to explore different paths toward success. These "paths" might vary in difficulty because all paths are not equitable and fair. He offered that we can change school funding practices, thereby changing the nature of urban communities i.e. providing more opportunities for adults in the community to obtain jobs in their own communities. He suggested that we must stick together in this fight because if we are persistent the "government can't ignore us forever." As such, Will is refusing to accept poverty and failure as an option. By "making the right decisions" to do well in school Will is creating new "paths" and disrupting single stories about his community in Urbantown.

"What Is He About?" Discussion

"What is he about?" is a question that Shawn raised in one of our interviews. More specifically, he wished that people took more time to ask the aforementioned question rather than make assumptions about Black males. As such, it's a fitting subtitle for my discussion about the scholars' Artifactual LENs. In order to begin to understand what he is about, we have to *listen* (Kinloch & San Pedro (2014) and see him for who is and who wants to be. This work is grounded in acts of *listening* and the telling, retelling, and re-presenting of stories in nonlinear ways; as such the stories presented are complicated, complex, and multi-voiced (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). Part of seeing the scholars was acknowledging and respecting their identities. This was a humanizing space where they could actively engage their scholar identity traits (Whiting, 2009) and critical race consciousness (Carter, 2008). Writing through their scholar identities created space for them to explore themselves as academicians and critically examine why they had particular beliefs about education. Writing through this project also affirmed (both individually and collectively) that they could achieve within the context of being Black (Carter, 2008).

The scholars offered diverse, provocative and multi-voiced perspectives in the A LENs project. This was a culminating project. In order to get the scholars to be willing to share their LENs on education, we had to cultivate an “environment of care” that “fostered open dialogue and communal sense of trust” (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2014). As Shawn noted in one of our interviews, “there’s levels to it.” What cannot be taken for granted here was the “care” that scholars had in mentoring one another (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2014). As is evidenced by the artifacts themselves, the scholars had some reservations about schools and teachers. By asking the scholars to be vulnerable, I had to be vulnerable as well. This meant taking risks and being ready to address whatever wounds may have been opened through these activities.

The “classroom community” (hooks, 1994) we created cultivated a positive critical race consciousness for the scholars (Carter, 2008). The Artifactual LENs had three components: the content, process, and impact of the work for the scholars. For example, Shawn’s school bus with handcuffs artifact helps educators and researchers to understand what he felt when he wrote about his school feeling like a prison or "kids being incarcerated, but not knowing." Rajon's Finding Nemo artifact pushed us to consider the implications of what it meant for him to leave Quahog in order to pursue a quality education. These examples speak to the *content* of A LENs. Furthermore, this finding was consistent with the composition literature which indicates that writing is a mode through which "students can learn to exchange ideas, explain positions, critique perspectives, question values, establish points of view, and reflect on beliefs that may contradict other people's beliefs" (Kinloch, 2010, p. 44).

The *process* of the A LENs project had several levels. Not only did the scholars write about their educational experiences, students also created and/or purchased artifacts that best represented their LENs. Once the papers were written, artifacts were selected, and the scholars engaged in a gallery walk at the end of the WCL program; the scholars started to experience the *impact* of their work on others and on themselves. The impact was both interpersonal and intrapersonal.

Engaging with fellow scholars' artifacts encouraged internal and external reflections because people asked one another questions and gave critical feedback. They helped one another to see things and experience feelings that had not previously surfaced. The preface of this dissertation spoke to the impact of Rajon's LENs at the personal level (i.e. tears). He also wrote in his reflection, "I've never put these experiences into my work." Intrapersonally, some of the scholars realized areas of improvement. For example, Aaronwick noted in his reflection about the project, "I see how some people put pieces of themselves into their writing to take that extra step to be personal and it has shown me how I can improve and do the same." This speaks to the "sociocultural benefits of writing" that Tatum and Gue (2010) speak about. More specifically, they note that when Black males "who anchor their writing in a collaborative writing environment that they assess as both engaging and supportive…[take] on a writer's identity to view the world" and "exercise agency to name their realities" (Tatum & Gue, 2010, p. 139). It spoke explicitly to the ways the scholars encouraged and perhaps mentored one another. Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2014) talk about the significance of culturally relevant care (CRC), which is characterized by a strong sense of community, rigorous demands, an integration of different cultures, and a general affirmation of one's humanity.

When I listened to the scholars I heard several themes across their Artifactual LENs. Those cross case themes consisted of: (1) rhetoric of possibility through meritocracy where the scholars discussed the implications of institutional racism, (2) inequities between and among suburban and urban schools and communities, (3) oppressive violence and policing, (4) discrepancies between learning and education, (5) agency to give back to their communities and (6) proving people wrong. In the following sections, I speak more explicitly about how these themes emerged *across* the scholars.

Rhetoric of possibility through meritocracy (implications of institutional racism). The scholars all had rhetoric of possibility in their essays. They all brought into this idea of meritocracy, to a certain extent, even though they all understood that people are afforded access to different opportunities in life. As such, they often grappled with this in their writing and subsequent reflections about their A LENs. All of the young men spoke about institutional racism, though none of the scholars named this phenomenon as such. Rather, the scholars spoke explicitly about a "system" of education. They wrote at length about the ways education functioned in different aspects of their lives. The young men problematized and critiqued systems of education for perpetuating inequity even though they all were "benefiting" (at least to some extent) from this very system of inequity. They actively brought into the discourse of education as an opportunity to succeed. After identifying institutional discourses, they problematized and challenged them, ultimately engaging in action (Souto-Manning, 2014). The young men never grammatically positioned themselves as victims. Rather, they often positioned themselves as having agency in making “good” or “positive” decisions to do well in school and make better lives for themselves and their families/communities. Further, they framed their agency as being complicated within situated institutional constraints. That is, the young men described “systems of education” and how those systems afforded certain people opportunities and not others.

Comparing and contrasting urban and suburban schools and communities. The scholars explained the differences between opportunities afforded to people, teaching (expectations), and differences between urban and suburban schools and communities. As the young men wrote, they each placed themselves in an urban or suburban context. These contexts were explicitly raced and gendered for the scholars. For example, Aaronwick spoke about his raced experiences with being the only Black student in his advanced and honors courses in his suburban high school. Because he understood what this meant in his particular school context, he worked “twice as hard” as most of his White counterparts to make sure that he was not seen as THE Black kid who did not take care of his academic business. Black students in his predominantly White high school were few in numbers. Plus, most people in his school had negative images of Black people, which according to Aaronwick’s account, were often reinforced by Black students in his school who were “loud and obnoxious.” Therefore, he felt like a “race representative” working to constantly combat negative stereotypes about Black students. He displayed his framing agency within a set of moral obligations to succeed because he was a race representative. He grammatically positioned himself as having individual active agency to make these changes to do well in school, despite the negative stereotypes about Black students in his school.

For Rajon, he raced and gendered his experiences by comparing himself to other young Black men in his neighborhood and school communities. He did not want to be like the young men that he knew. He framed the contexts of his neighborhood and community within situated poverty and low educational attainment. Rajon explained in his Artifactual LENs, “Their words of encouragement don’t really motivate me. Their lifestyles motivate me to succeed.” He grammatically positioned himself as being able to succeed, even without role models. He wrote about not having role models and wanting to be different because their “lifestyles” were not appealing to him.

There is certainly room for growth in helping the scholars to be critical of the same institutions they are all currently successful in and to trouble to notion of *success* they were constructing for themselves in order to pull back the layers of the “ideologies” (Freire, 1970; Tyson, 2003; Willis, 2008) that inform their daily decisions. There are benefits and consequences for acquiescing to particular notions of success. For example, Rajon described a success, which involved leaving his hometown. I was also at times, complicit in certain notions of academic success. For example, I could have asked them to consider critically what success would have looked like if they changed their communities, rather than leave them.

Shawn raced his experiences by saying that he wanted to be in a school setting that was preparing him to be able to compete with other races in the world. He was conflicted about this reality because he recognized that he was “not given the same knowledge” as students of other races who attend different types of schools in suburban school districts. His grammatical agency positioned as questioning and problematizing his educational access to competitive opportunities, especially compared to other students from different racial groups. His quest for knowledge was something bigger than his school offered. He framed his agency as being limited within the situated context of his urban school. As such, he went above and beyond to learn additional material beyond the content that his school offered. Shawn explained, “As a student, my knowledge expands because of things I do personally” (outside of school). However, he re-positioned himself grammatically as having agency to expand his knowledge outside of school. He did not want to wait on his teachers to provide him with a competitive education.

Will raced and gendered his educational narrative experiences. More specifically, he wrote about the ways the young men in his “all African American male” population (his classmates) were “wilder when there are no females around” and they lacked a desire to learn. This framing left Will with at least two choices, to join the “wilder” boys in his class or reject them and choose to do differently. He grammatically positioned himself as “being successful” and “making the right decisions” to ignore the negative influences in his school.

Overall, all of the young men spoke about the negative connotations of being in urban schools and communities. Likewise, they spoke of the positive aspects of suburban communities. Aaronwick complicated this narrative by bringing in some of his motivations to succeed academically as a race representative. For the young men, these worlds (urban and suburban) were positioned as polar opposites.

Oppressive (symbolic) violence and policing in schools and communities. Although three of the four young men attended urban schools and lived in urban communities, all of the scholars spoke about explicit violence in their schools and communities. This violence was visual. Aaronwick attended a suburban school and lived in a suburban community, but he spoke of violence as well. For the three young men in urban schools, the violence was symbolic and physical. It involved walking through scanners in order to clear entry into their schools. In fact, Shawn compared going to school to walking into a correction center daily. In the urban schools discussed here, the scholars were randomly stopped and frisked when walking down the halls. This may or may not have involved police dogs looking for drugs. Sometimes they were stopped by actual police officers, as opposed to security guards (in school). They were also "locked down" in their classrooms and schools. They reported that their classrooms doors were locked anywhere from minutes to hours at a time, depending on the codes used that day. These codes used more often toward the end of the school year, after much of the standardized tests were completed for the academic year. They were framed as objects in these school occurrences, lacking power and motivation to do academic schoolwork after extended periods of being "locked down." Ironically, Aaronwick described his school building as looking and feeling like a "prison" though they had no scanners or random stop and frisks of students. He claimed the building was originally designed to be a prison, but the neighbors protested and the building was made into a school instead.

Paradoxically, these experiences combined with their summer teaching experiences at the elementary school, pushed those young men to consider careers in education. The young men would not have seriously considered education as a career field without WCL summer enrichment program. When I asked the scholars about being teachers, they were not excited about the idea. They noted things like "poor pay" and dealing with "bad students" as their reasons why they didn't want to be teachers. However, when speaking to them explicitly about their teaching experiences in the summer program and reflecting on their experiences in school as students, they felt pulled to pursue education careers, framing careers in education as the right thing to do in order to give back to their communities.

Learning is not equal to education. The scholars distinguished between the intellectual pursuit of knowledge and "doing school." They all noted that they thought of themselves as "smart" or eager to "learn." These things were all different from doing well in school. They all understood that, for them, grades represented something other than intellectual ability. More specifically, grades were a reflection of one's effort to do school well. Because of their suspicions of schools and teachers to provide them with adequate information to be competitive with people beyond their home and school communities, they all engaged in activities beyond their schools to make themselves competitive. Being in WCL, academic enrichment was one way for them to exercise their exposure to other communities, thus grammatically positioning the scholars as agents. High school then became a vehicle they operated to get from one place to another, somewhat on their terms. On "their terms" means the scholars knew what they had to do in order to survive or do "well" in order to get grades and associated accolades. In fact, most of these young men (except for Shawn) reported not doing much actual studying outside of class. They all reported being "smart" and that they did not need to study in order to do well in class and school.

Framing agency: on giving back. The scholars demonstrated framing agency or expressed situated morals in the need to "give back." Rajon, Shawn, and Will wanted to personally give back to their communities when they become successful via service endeavors. More specifically, Rajon, Shawn, and Will discussed creating local community centers for Black youth in their respective communities. These community centers and programs were motivated by the idea of providing access to better schools and opportunity for success for children from urban contexts. Aaronwick spoke about coming back to one's community to "share your knowledge" and "experiences with others to help them find their own path."

Proving people wrong and being change agents. All of the scholars were clear that they understood the implications of being Black students, especially Black young men in school. They were consciously aware that their performance academically and behavior-wise was a constant battle against negative statistics about Black people in general, but especially Black males. People expect Black males to fail, so they choose to do well prove people wrong in their assumptions about Black males. They all explicitly saw themselves as agentive in their learning and making life decisions.

The students desired academic spaces that were "socially and intellectually safe" (Lee, 2006). The content, process, and impact of the A LENs project engaged the scholars' "academic literacy" and "critical literacy" (Morrell, 2002, 2006). Overall, I concluded that the current structures of schools (at least the schools the scholars attended) do not allow students opportunities to fully explore who they are as humans. Students' lives are thought of as separate from the curriculum and produce the sentiments that Shawn shared in his LENs reflection:

> *It showed me how people can actually take their time out of their day to help inner city or suburban area children. I've never done anything like this. This one project I can say flashed my light back on my education because I was starting to doubt the schooling system, and was losing interest in school*.

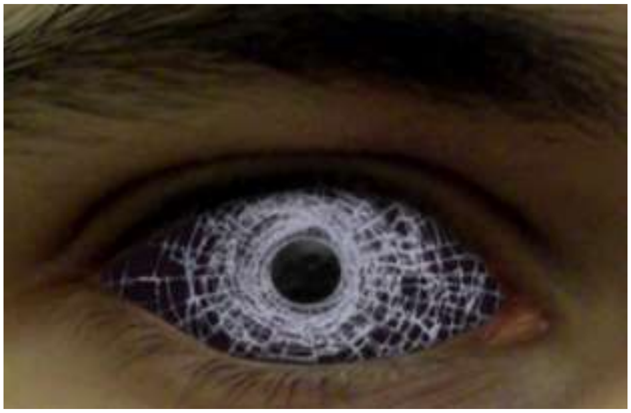


Figure 5.6. Shattered Lens. *Retrieved from https://www.pinterest.com/explore/eye-contacts/*

I want to end this chapter with a shattered lens.

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[9] According to Winn & Ubiles (2010) there are four phases of worthy witnessing: (1) admission, (2) declaration, revelation, and confidentiality. These phases must be carried out with the “three r’s- responsibility, reciprocity, and respect.”

CHAPTER 6: "Untold Stories"- Constructing, Negotiating And Embodying Scholar Identities *Across* Academic Contexts

> *"…it's like an untold story because… I can't describe my life story to someone like, "I don't want to steal your phone." I have a 3 point* [3.68 grade point average]*… I just know like these people will never know who they have in front of their eyes…"* (Shawn's Interview)
>
> *"…the 3rd grade I went to summer school for the first time… I said "no." I'm not doing this again. So I changed who I was. I started, um doing all my work, paying attention and I'm in a good situation, going to a good high school and I guess that brought me here too."* (Will's Interview)
>
> *"… I just thought that as soon as I thought of Black people, I thought slaves… and I didn't really want to associate myself with that."* (Aaronwick's Interview)
>
> "*… he kicked me out…I knocked on the door to get back in and he hand me this paper like you got to fill out the paper to get back in the classroom… and like on the paper it say like… literally it's a shame that your poor judgment in class has gotten you kicked out. Now sit and write a 10 sentence essay apologizing and saying what you're gonna do right… I'm just looking at the paper like I'm not fenna write this…"* (Rajon's Interview)

"Untold stories" is an Nvivo code from one of Shawn's interviews during *We Chose to Learn*. *Untold* is an interesting adjective for Shawn to have utilized to describe his experiences as a young Black man because it refers to an experience that is immeasurable; too much to explain. It also refers to a silenced, null, or unreported narrative. In this way, Shawn's proclamation was personal, complex, and humanizing. Though this was Shawn's characterization of living as a young Black man in society, I found that *untold* narratives were applicable to all of the scholars: Hence, the name for this chapter. Each scholar, in their own way, expressed an untold and intimate understanding of the implications of being young, Black and male. When Shawn shared with me that living as an academically high performing (3.68 GPA) young Black man in Urbantown was like an "untold story," he was speaking about the "veil" of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), the "cumulative risks" (Henfield, 2012), and an "illegible masculinity" (Neal, 2013). In other words, being Black and male means that people assume the worst of him (e.g. a person who would steal). The assumption was never about his high academic GPA or his college-bound reality. Instead, people underestimated his worth and unless they took time to move beyond their assumptions, "these people will never know who they have in front of their eyes." By critically investigating these untold stories, I aimed to demonstrate how these untold stories exist, not only for Shawn, an individual: Rather, it was a concern for all of the scholars. This is consistent with education, social science and humanities-oriented research literature, which speaks about Black males being "feared" (Young, 2007) and treated differently because of their intersectional identity markers as Black men. The goal of this chapter, which focuses on analytic category two (intersectional identities), is to disrupt these "singles stories" (Adiche, 2009) by foregrounding their "untold stories" in the voices of the scholars.

There are three analytic frameworks that guided my analysis in this chapter: Projects in Humanization-PiHs (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014), Critical Race Consciousness-CRC (Carter, 2008), and Scholar Identity Model (Whiting, 2009). PiHs are the primary framework through which I understood CRC and SIM. PiHs are grounded in acts of *listening* and the telling, retelling, and re-presenting of stories in nonlinear ways; as such the stories presented are complicated, complex, and multi-voiced (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In order to nuance the ways that I *listen* to the stories of the scholars, I called on critical race consciousness and scholar identity frameworks because of their ability to collectively address some of the significance of race and gender in the lives of the young Black men. According to Carter (2008), critical race consciousness or CRC are attitudes or beliefs that highlight the awareness of asymmetrical power relationships between Black and White Americans. These attitudes and beliefs frame the ways students understand schooling and upward mobility (Carter, 2008). Furthermore, Carter explains CRC have two main components: (1) Black students have race pride and feel a sense of connectedness to being Black, despite a history of extreme adversity and (2) Black students see themselves as being able to achieve academically within the context of being Black. As such, they did not see achievement as an ideal separate from being Black (Carter, 2008). Overall, having a CRC helps Black students to achieve. While CRC attends to the centrality of race, it does not adequately attend to the intersectional (racialized and gendered) experiences of Black males specifically. As such, I turned to Whiting (2009), who offers the Scholar Identity Model (SIM). A combination of high grades and a belief in one's self to be competent, capable, and intelligent are the two main components of SIM. There are nine traits that contribute to a Scholar Identity: (1) self efficacy (2) future orientation (3) willing to make sacrifices (4) internal locus of control (5) self awareness (6) strong need for achievement (7) academic self confidence (8) race pride, and (9) masculinity. While SIM offers important traits of Black male students, it does not speak to *how* these traits are cultivated. I build from these frameworks to nuance racialized and gendered identities of the scholars from WCL.

It is my understanding that their intersectional identities have three distinct, but interconnected sub-components. More specifically, I observed and analyzed how the scholars were (1) *constructing* (2) *embodying*, and (3) *negotiating* their scholar identities *across* academic spaces. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the intersections of race, gender, and academic performance through these aforementioned three components of identity. By "constructing" I am specifically talking about the ways the young men defined and made sense of their own identities. By "embodying" I am addressing the actual performance or implementation of certain tasks. These were observable and materialized academic behaviors the young men engaged in.

Finally, by "negotiating," I paid particular attention to the ways the young men dealt with and rationalized tensions presented (in academic settings) as young Black men. The identities of the young men are *intersectional* (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) because they account for the complex intersections of raced, gendered, and classed. I examined the interplay of these marked identities by emphasizing my experiences with the young men in their respective high schools in our follow up interviews. In this way, I offer some understandings about the insights and processes that shaped and are shaped by the scholars' experiences in schools.

In the previous chapter, I addressed how three types of narratives emerged from the A LENs of the scholars: (de)humanizing stories, refusal stories, and (myth of) meritocracy stories. These themes were present across the scholars' interviews (during WCL and during the academic year in the scholars' respective high schools). In this chapter, however, instead of focusing on those themes, I move to the intersectional identity theme that emerged the foreground. This chapter is organized into several parts. First, I historicize Black male identities. Then, I unpack the three components of identity (constructing, embodying, and negotiating). The manifestations of these components are addressed through the voices of the scholars. Afterward, I demonstrate how the scholars' untold stories speak to larger concerns with Projects in Humanization, critical race consciousness, and scholar identities.

Constructing Identity: On Being Cool, Chilling and Learning

Identity construction is the first component of identity that I analyze in this chapter. By "constructing" I am specifically talking about the ways the young men defined and made sense of their own identities. I utilize the gerund form of *constructing* to signal that these identities are fluid and situational. Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) tell us that we have the responsibility as researchers "to listen-closely and carefully- to *what* young people are saying, and *how* and f*or* *what reasons* they are saying it" (p. 26 emphasis added). When I *listened* to the scholars, they all defined and made sense of themselves in particular ways. They wanted to be seen and acknowledged for the ways they defined themselves, especially since all of the scholars were constructing identities for themselves in opposition to what others defined about young Black men. Themes that emerged across identity constructing for the scholars concerned "chilling," being "cool" and "learning." In this section, I show how each of the scholars are constructing their identities.

Table 6.1

Constructing Identity: On Being Cool, Chilling and Learning Scholar Theme Chart

Aaronwick	*"I Didn't Really Want to Associate Myself with That…"*
Rajon	*"It's a Manly Thing to be Smart"*
Will	*"I Wanna Do Something Do Something With My Life"*
Shawn	*"[T]hese people will never know who they have in front of their eyes…"*

"I didn't really want to associate myself with that".

> **Sakeena:** *When you think about the different layers of your identity, what part of your identity do you think is most important to you?*
> **Aaronwick:** *Umm* [extended pause]. *Well recently I didn't think that my race mattered, but now I think it is the most important.*
> **Sakeena:** *And why? In what ways?*
> **Aaronwick:** *Because I just thought that. Like I mean I knew that obviously African Americans have like previous history, besides slavery. But I just thought that as soon as I thought of Black people, I thought slaves and I didn't really want to associate myself with that. But now that I learned more I know that it's a lot of stuff that Black people have invented. I know now that in Africa we're kings and queens and stuff like that. So um, I'm just embracing all that. I didn't really understand that before.*
> **Sakeena:** *Um hm. So do they talk about those sorts of things in your school?*

> **Aaronwick:** *Uh um* [sound to signify “no” while he also shook his head left to right] *Well it. I mean they obviously talk about slavery, but not about you know before that.*

At the time of this interview, Aaronwick was a 16-year-old Black male senior in a predominately White, middle-class neighborhood and school. To be specific, Northwood High School (pseudonym) was 70% White, 20% Black and 10% Asian. Northwood H.S. has a prestigious reputation and is located in the Northwood community. Aaronwick lived at home with his mother, stepfather, and younger brother. His mother was a full time special education teacher and also a Ph.D. student in education. His stepfather was an entrepreneur. Aaronwick had a 3.0 overall GPA on a 4.0 scale and 22 on the American College Test or ACT exam. He also took three Advanced Placement (AP) courses in European history, physics, and math. He received a partial merit-based (as opposed to financial need) scholarship to STU where he is studying Secondary Education.

Aaronwick spent much time in our interviews constructing his identity as a young Black man from the White middle-class suburbs. In his school, it was taboo to address issues of race. As such, he was conditioned to believe that in his high school ‘race didn’t matter’ and it was certainly not an issue or problem. This is consistent with the literature in that predominantly White spaces, White people tend not to acknowledge race (Tatum, 1997) and/or the presence of “White privilege” (McIntosh, 1989). As I *listened* to Aaronwick describe his school, I heard him describe a school organized around institutionally racist practices. By institutional racism, I refer to the structural patterns, discriminatory treatment, or unfair practices of his school in ways that advantage White students and disadvantage Black students. That is, the patterns that organized his school could not be necessarily assigned to one individual. Rather, certain patterns were embedded within the fabric of the school’s daily functions. While Aaronwick did not share overt experiences with racist acts in his school, he explained there was a well-known “social stigma” about Black students at his high school. He shared that African Americans in his school have a “history of being loud and obnoxious.” As such, it was important for Aaronwick to disassociate himself from African Americans in his school and focus on being “cool.”

According to Aaronwick, the first week of school every year is always “a little strange” because he feels like teachers look at him and automatically think, “Oh I got this Black kid. I might have trouble with him or I might have to put him in the front. Or I might have to isolate him from other Black people.” Though no teacher ever told him these thoughts directly, he noticed a pattern year after year that Black students in his classes were put “in the front” of the class or were strategically “isolate[d] from other Black people.” This practice is a *microaggression* or a subtle encounter with racism, usually unnoticed by members of the majority race (Carter Andrews, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) within a system of institutional racism. In other words, his teachers did not tell him they were moving his seat (within the classroom) because of his race, but he noticed that Black people never sat together in his classes. It is possible that his White (mostly middle class female) teachers were not conscious of their own practices and did not intend to harm their Black students. Nevertheless, Aaronwick believed this practice was connected to the “social stigma” of Black students being “trouble.” He noticed the practice, but Aaronwick lacked the language to “name” (Freire, 1970) his experiences prior to being in WCL.

Though Aaronwick was constructing a “cool” identity for himself, what caught his attention in class/school was the ‘identity that others (in this case White teachers) reflected back to him’ (Tatum, 1997). Because of “the history” of Black students at his school, Aaronwick was hyperconscious of his Blackness or what some scholars call “racial spotlighting” (Carter

Andrews, 2012). Reading about critical theory in education and dialoging about concepts like racial discrimination or institutional racism (to name a couple), helped Aaronwick to make connections about his prior three years of high school as a young Black man in a predominantly White school space. Aaronwick said when they [teachers] "see that I'm cool…they change their opinion." *Cool* as Aaronwick defined it means that "I'm not obnoxious and I don't yell out in class." Instead, he offered "funny" contributions in class and he "was not always on his phone… not paying attention." He extended this construction by noting that he had a "cool way of looking at stuff… I try to look at stuff from other perspectives." By this, Aaronwick meant that he liked to hear multiple perspectives on any given issue. Because he was positioned as a young Black man in a predominantly White school, he discussed that he had opportunities to listen to Caucasian perspectives as well as Black perspectives about schools and communities. Most of his family members lived in urban communities. What made Aaronwick "cool" was his ability to offer the perspectives of his Caucasian friends to his Black family members and vice versa. In this way, he served as a liaison between these different communities. Serving as a liaison was cool for Aaronwick.

Aaronwick valued his individuality. "I have locks" (a hair style) and there are "only like three people in my school with locks… so it makes mine look individual" Aaronwick said. Because of "my color and my hair…people notice me from down the hall… [plus] I got a unique name." These were positive traits for Aaronwick. In fact, he thought it was "something special" for people to "tell other people that they know" him.

Another key feature of the identity that Aaronwick was constructing for himself was being a learner. Aaronwick believed that real men were smart and worked hard; they were not "bums." Aaronwick was also very inquisitive. For example, after we read Beverly Tatum's

(1997) *The Complexity of Identity* in class, he asked, “What would happen if the subordinates stopped paying attention to the dominant group and just focused on themselves? Would dominant groups still have power?” In class, in his writing, and in his interviews he was always pushing against the grain of what he called “social norms.” He claimed the best way that he expresses himself was through “song.” Aaronwick explained that listening to “lyricists” (as opposed to rappers) like Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West helped him to better understand himself as a young Black man. He was intentional to describe Kendrick and Kanye as lyricists because “they don’t just talk about money, girls, cars, and drugs.” Rather, what “appealed” to him about the aforementioned lyricists is they “could rhyme a big word with another big word.” With this type of rhyming, he was forced “to google that word to figure [it] out [and he was] learning.” He enjoyed learning new words and concepts and challenging “social norms” in his school and family communities.

Raising his critical consciousness (Carter, 2008; Freire, 1970; Willis et.al, 2008), namely his experiences by participating in WCL, helped him to see how much of his life, especially his schooling and home community experiences, were impacted by his racial identity. For example, Aaronwick talked about how there was only “one Black male teacher” in his school and he “only worked part-time.” Further, he said he was the “only Black student” in all of his Advanced Placement (AP) classes. In his school, they did not offer classes about African American people though they “obviously talk about slavery, but not about, you know, before that.” Nevertheless, he took “Advanced Placement European History.” He sensed that African Americans were not all “slaves,” but lacked concrete examples to *name* his schooling experiences. Further, he explained that when he thought of Black people, he “thought of slaves” and he did not really want to associate himself that. His Blackness signaled a past of enslavement and present of "being loud and obnoxious"- none of which he felt truly matched the identity he was constructing for himself. Aaronwick was not interested in "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Rather, he was interested in being "cool." In some ways, being "cool" was a form of resistance and motivation to succeed academically.

"It's a man thing to be smart". Rajon's "manly" scholar identity involved "chilling" and not being "stressed out." He felt it was important for men not to complain and do all of their work. He prided himself on completing all of his work and "chilling" while doing it. He came from a low-income, single parent household where he lived with his younger sisters. His mother was unemployed. If he lacked resources, for example not having a computer at home, it was important for him to not complain. Instead, he would find someone with cell phone and complete his work using a cell phone. Rajon sent me several pieces of writing during the academic school year (after participating in WCL) using this mode of communication. He loved writing and self identified as a "reader" and a "writer." Rajon did not like speaking in front of the class or in front of large crowds of people. However, when he was asked to speak in front of large crowds of people, he reported that it was important "to man up" and face his fears. He feared "messing up" and having people watch him.

Our third formal interview was on site at Quahog High School. Rajon was 18 at the time. I shared an academic article with Rajon: Gilman Whiting's (2009) article, *The Scholar identity institute: Guiding Darnel and Black males*. I gave him some time to read the article and tell me his thoughts about it. After reading the article, he proudly proclaimed, "Yes, all nine of them are true! …I can relate to all of these. You know, I think about the future all of the time and you know I'm strong in achievement." By these statements, Rajon was identifying as a scholar. A scholar was one who demonstrated academic achievement and believed they were intelligent.

"I'm a self-applying person" and "I have lots of self responsibility… He further explained, "I don't feel feminine at all… It's a manly thing to be smart. I am the man of the house…" Rajon went on about the ways he was "manly" scholar and how being smart was a "manly thing."

> ***Sakeena:*** *How does reading a book or getting good grades translate to you being the man of the house?*
> ***Rajon:*** *It's like you prepare yourself to have certain responsibilities you know to stay focused and make it through college. If you get that degree a job shouldn't be that hard to get. Well I mean you might not get a job like that, but you'll get a job with the degree and your pay is gonna be higher. You'll be able to provide…*

From Rajon's vantage point, men were supposed to be smart, take care of their responsibilities, and be providers. He understood that getting a degree was not an automatic ticket to a good job. However, he understood that having a degree increased one's likelihood of increasing their salary in the long run and being a better provider for their family. "Everybody should want to be better than what their parents were," Rajon explained. By being smart, one positioned themselves to be better than their parents and take care of their responsibilities.

> ***Sakeena:*** *How do you feel about being Black?*
> ***Rajon:*** *"I love being Black… a lot of the statistics for like Black males ain't too good, so I gotta prove them wrong by living above the standards.*
> ***Sakeena:*** *How do you know about the statistics about Black males?*
> ***Rajon:*** *From the [WCL] from a lot of stuff at school and stuff I see on tv. It's all around. I am mean it ain't too hard to figure out you know the statistics about Black males… We are just frowned upon, so I gotta make the statistics better.*

Rajon's race and gender were central to the identity that he was constructing for himself. He was critically conscious of what it meant to be a young Black man. From the outside, being Black and male often points towards negative statistics. He felt "frowned upon" but rather than giving up and becoming a negative statistic, Rajon felt obliged to prove people wrong through being smart and "living above the standards." This is consistent with his A LENs where he refused to be a product of his environment. In this way, he was a constructing a positive racial and gender identity that involved high academic achievement.

“I wanna do something with my life”.

> ***Sakeena:*** *What’s the most important aspect of your identity?*
> ***Will:*** *Determination. I wanna do something with my life. I don’t want to live in [Urbantown] all my life. I wanna have a nice house. Family. I want my kids to go to a better school that I went to and have more opportunities that I had.*

At the time of this interview, Will was a 17 year-old Black male senior in a single-sex high school, which was 98% Black. Eighty-five percent of the students who attended his high school were eligible for free and reduced priced lunch. Most of the students who attended Urbantown were accepted to colleges and universities, and many received both academic and athletic scholarships to attend. Attending college was a marked expectation in the school’s mission.

Will’s high school was located in a historically significant and culturally rich, but low-income neighborhood in Urbantown. WCL was fresh in his memory and my presence with him in this interview was a reminder of WCL and his experiences at STU. During this time, he was also thinking about the future he was constructing for himself. He had a 3.9 GPA (on a 4.0 scale). He was preparing for the ACT and applying for colleges and scholarships. The Homecoming Dance was soon approaching. The school personnel (during my school visit) at his school confirmed that he was a “good guy” and took care of his “academic business.” In his prior high school (which was a coeducational environment), he explained the “kids were behind. That’s why I left that school.” He went to private (Catholic) school for freshmen and sophomore years in high school. He also reported that his mom had him to transfer to Urbantown H.S. because she understood the social capital and opportunities offered through Urbantown. He spent his junior and senior year at Urbantown.

He described Urbantown H. S. as “all Black males walking in the hallways going to class.” At Urbantown, there were “African Americans who want to be successful” and “even though some don't want to be there, they still go to school every day," according to Will. The image of young Black men going to school, even if they didn't want to be there, is interesting because it provides a window into the hope of doing *something* with one's life. Outside of the school, he explained that he mainly witnessed "poverty." Therefore, for those students who didn't want to be in school, being in school was still better than being on the streets and doing nothing.

As the excerpt from our interview conveys, Will wanted to do *something* with his life. He was constructing a classic American dream; one that involved children and a house in a safe community with good schools and access to opportunities. It is important to note that he didn't see himself constructing this lifestyle in Urbantown. He did not want to live in Urbantown for his whole life and he felt that he needed to leave Urbantown in order to pursue his dreams.

For Will, being a scholar was "serious" business and went on to describe himself as "outgoing, intelligent, nice, funny, and African American." Being African American was a proud, marked identity for Will and shaped his scholar identity. In addition to high academic performance, Whiting (2009) defines a "scholar identity" as an identity where the individual sees themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent. In our interview, Will defined a scholar as "com[ing] to class everyday alert, paying attention (not sleeping) and [doing all of his] work." Initially, Will took for granted his acceptance to participate in WCL. "In the beginning, when I first got accepted, I'm like ah it's a regular program. But when I got here… I was like this is an honor to be chosen…" He appreciated the "opportunities" to "have good role models" who wanted him "to do the right thing in college." Furthermore, he was pleased to be around so many "African Americans going to school… [who] *wanna* be successful and wanna do something with their lives."

Will explained in one of his reflective essays, “African Americans are not perceived as smart and some people think they are inferior to all races.” When I asked him how this made him feel in a follow up interview, he shared, “It makes me feel bad because I know that African Americans are talented, but we just you know waste it.” For this reason, Will self-identified as a “scholar” and his defining trait was his determination. Scholars, according to Will, were on their “P’s and Q’s.” It meant that a person did “what you need to do in order to be successful and not give up.” Will was constructing a scholar identity for himself; a serious one. This scholar identity shaped his interactions across academic settings. It is no wonder that he received the most recorded scholarship dollars at Urbantown High School. He was accepted to 18 colleges/universities. He attended a predominantly White institution outside of his home state where he pursued Elementary Education as his major.

“[T]hese people will never know who they have in front of their eyes”.

> **Sakeena:** *What do you think society thinks about young Black men in [Urbantown]?*
> **Shawn:** *Um just basically that we all are violent or thieves…it’s like an untold story because… I can’t describe my life story to someone like, “I don’t want to steal your phone.” I have a 3 point* [3.68 grade point average]*… I just know like these people will never know who they have in front of their eyes…*

Shawn was 17 years old at the time of this interview and attended Urbantown High School (the same school as Will). Shawn’s mother was a hair stylist and his stepfather was a pastor of a local church in Urbantown. Shawn’s response to my question directly illuminates the “cumulative risks for being Black and male” (Henfield, 2012, p. 217). To expand on Henfield’s notion of cumulative risks, he asserts:

> Black males face more barriers to achievement than other racial and gender groups- they are profiled, negatively stereotyped, and feared because of the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Black males historically and in the media. Those Black males who have managed to achieve academic success have,

> more than likely, had to overcome a number of obstacles (Henfield, 2012, p. 217).

It is of utmost importance to note that Black males (like any other raced or gender group) *want* to be successful. Therefore, Henfield (2012) argues Black males need empathy, compassion, and support to resist the negative portrayals and stay focused on meeting their goals. It is evident from Shawn's response to my question that he was experiencing hurt and frustration about the ways he as a young Black man was being perceived by society. This hurt and frustration was also evident in his A LENs when he explained the school believed they were "criminals in the making" and treated them like such. Shawn argued in his A LENs that schools are a reflection of society's values. Because society perceives young Black men as "violent" or as "thieves" then it is no wonder that he felt criminalized every time he entered into Urbantown high school and walked through scanners and metal detectors. Neal (2013) in *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black masculinities* (2013), argues the most "legible" Black male bodies are often rendered as criminal bodies in need of policing and containment. Therefore, the identity that Shawn was constructing for himself as a writer and a scholar was also a story of invisibility, an "illegible masculinity" (Neal, 2013) and "racial ignoring" (Carter, 2012). Being a scholar and a writer did not fit the scheme that society of young Black men like Shawn from Urbantown.

Notice here that Shawn *owned* having a 3.68 GPA. Therefore, he demonstrated a scholar identity (high academic performance and saw himself as an academician or intelligent). At the same time, he also mitigated agency in this excerpt of his narrative. He said knowing that people think of Black males as primarily criminals and thieves, as opposed to scholars, results in "untold stories." He said that he cannot describe to every single person that he meets on the streets that he is an academically high performing Black male student with a 3.68 GPA. What's more, he realized that he is never assumed to be smart. No one ever mistook him for being a scholar at first glance. Consider the burden in knowing that you are well read, academically high performing, but people fail to notice these traits. In this way, he expressed a type of learned helplessness (i.e. I can't do anything about it) and he just learns how to cope with the "discomfort" of this reality. He mitigated his agency again by noting that there was nothing that he could do to change the minds of unsuspecting strangers. Ultimately, he said that most people will never know who they have right in "front of their eyes." In other words, he felt invisible as an academically high performing Black male, at least outside of a traditional school setting where he excelled. As such, young Black men are often boxed into severely limited scripts that define what it means to be Black, male, and scholarly. More specifically, many doubt the (academic) abilities of academically high performing Black males and they are often perceived as an anomaly (Ferguson, 2001; Henfield, 2012; Kirkland, 2012; Whiting, 2009b). Shawn's "untold story" showed why it is crucial to disrupt single stories and complicate the limited scripts we have about young Black men. To illustrate this point, I went on to ask Shawn:

> **Sakeena:** *So how does that make you feel considering like who you are and that you're like kind of opposite of that?*
> **Shawn:** *Ummm definitely uncomfortable. It's definitely uncomfortable. And not only that you know. It's like a whole bunch of untold stories kind of. So like when it does happen you, can't do nothing about it because it is society. So it makes me feel uncomfortable though…*

Though Shawn felt his school and society perceived and treated him as a criminal, he did not allow those things to deter him from achieving academically in school. Instead, Shawn proclaimed, "I'm first generation [college] so I gotta do well." Shawn felt obligated to not only attend, but also graduate college. In this way, Shawn was cultivating a "critical race consciousness" (Carter, 2008). According to Carter (2008), students who are critically race conscious utilize "racial adversity [that] motivates them to counter societal stereotypes about members of their racial groups and persevere in their academic pursuits" (p. 22). Shawn was choosing to achieve in the midst of adversity and negative stereotypes about young Black men like him. I'm reminded of his reflection about his A LENs project when he noted that he was starting to lose interest in school before participating in the WCL summer enrichment program. In his A LENs, he complained the curriculum was not rigorous so that all of the students could succeed. Therefore, he made efforts to expand his reading and writing skills and experiences outside of the classroom. This fed his love for reading and writing (which I will discuss in more detail in the embodying identity section), but undoubtedly also contributed to him receiving a 32 of a scale of 36 on the ACT exams. *Learning* was not something that he left to schools to teach because he felt they thought of him as unable to succeed. There was a lack of trust in schools that guided his achievement. Through his achievements people are going to better understand "who they have in front of their eyes…"

Embodying Identity: Activating my Agency

In the previous section of this chapter, I demonstrated how the young men constructed their identities. In this section, I explore how the young men are *embodying* the identities they are constructing for themselves. By "embodying" I am addressing the actual performance or implementation of certain tasks. These were observable and materialized academic behaviors the young men engaged in. Taking a closer look at the ways the young men embodied their scholar identities is important because the scholars were intentional about the identities they were constructing for themselves. This was also evidenced in the ways the young men engaged in "refusal stories" through their A LENs. In this section on activating my agency, I unpack the ways the young men enacted the identities they were constructing for themselves. Therefore, this section involves a combination of issues raised by the scholars and my observations of the young men.

Table 6.2

Embodying Identity: Activating My Agency Scholar Theme Chart

Aaronwick	*"That's Why I Play Lacrosse"*
Rajon	*Avoiding "The Wrong Place At The Wrong Time"*
Will	*"I Can Not Sleep In Class"*
Shawn	*"I Also Like to Write…That's Like a Field That I Specialize In"*

"That's why I play lacrosse" It was Aaronwick's understanding that being "from a suburban school and I'm African American and I play Lacrosse… [makes him] very diverse." He was very intentional about distinguishing himself from other "African Americans" who might be from large urban areas. Therefore, it gave him "more of an edge than somebody…who went to an urban school." He was certain of his ability to get into college and described going to a suburban school as his "ticket" into higher education because universities seek to enroll "diverse students." These intersections of being a Black, middle-class athlete with good grades signified to colleges/universities that he had access to not only different, but more superior, opportunities.

"[S]ince it's in the suburbs, it's better than, like, urban schools. I say that because I have friends that go to urban schools and I see that I'm more advanced than they are." Aaronwick shared his thoughts about attending a predominantly White suburban high school. According to Aaronwick, what made schools in the "suburbs" better than "urban schools" were the "choices" and "opportunities" made available to him. For example, he shared that he took an Advanced Placement Environmental Science course. He explained, "that's not a course offered at urban schools and I thought it was." He didn't realize his course was not offered at urban schools until he had a conversation with a student from an urban school and they confessed, "I don't have any idea what that is because that’s not even available at my school.” After sharing this conversation with me, Aaronwick did offer some pause to explain, “I knew my school was more, ummm, I don’t want to say better, but [has] more resources.” This pause for Aaronwick is notable because often schools are uncritically categorized as “suburban” and “urban.” There are different types of urban and suburban schools and we should not take for granted what these terms mean. Urban and suburban have been used as codes or proxies for avoiding complex issues of race, socioeconomic status, and access to opportunities. The uncritical positioning of these categories of schools is problematic because it also often wrongly positions “suburban schools” as uniformly White (racially) and right and “urban schools” as Black and/or Latino and bad. Aaronwick added some depth to this conversation by *naming* explicitly why his mother activated her agency to put Aaronwick in a suburban school. By exploring these reasons, I show how simply using *suburban* or *urban* as phrases are both inaccurate and inadequate for describing types of schools and communities.

According to Aaronwick, his mother struggled in “urban schools” due to the lack of resources and opportunities. Because she wanted a better life for him, she made sure to send him to suburban schools where he could garner access to advanced placement courses, college readiness programs, etc. Therefore, he explained “I got to take like all the opportunities that are at my school and use them to my advantage. That’s why I play Lacrosse. That’s not something offered at urban schools.” It is important to note that Aaronwick’s mom attended one urban school district in the Midwest. As such, it represents her experience; a valid experience, but one which is not necessarily representative of all urban school districts. For example, I am from New York City (NYC), which contains a wide variety of types of urban schools. Some of the schools are very exclusive for the children of celebrities, public figures, and the socioeconomically elite where a myriad of opportunities are embedded within the social and curricular fabric of the school. As such, there are people who travel from local suburban communities to attend schools in NYC. Other urban schools require students to pass rigorous exams, which are available to students of all socioeconomic statues and races. While yet others might be zone schools where typically only people from the neighborhood attend the school. These are the most racially and socioeconomically segregated schools and tend to mirror more of the experiences shared by Aaronwick and his mother. All of these types of urban schools in NYC vary in the levels of teacher attrition, security, and police presence, as well as access to resources for students.

Being in school, maintaining a 3.0 GPA, taking advanced placement courses and playing sports that are not often associated with urban communities, were all a part of an embodied experience for Aaronwick. In this way, Aaronwick, utilized "school success as a form of resistance" (Carter Andrews, 2009) to refuse certain types of struggles. It was a way of tilting the agency to move to a suburban community to his advantage in order to gain access to a better quality of life in the long run.

Avoiding "the wrong place at the wrong time"

> **Sakeena:** Do you feel like you have to work?
> **Rajon:** If I want money.
> **Sakeena:** There's a difference between I *have* to work and I *want* to work. Where do you fit?
> **Rajon:** Do I want to work? Yeah. All that free time I got I might as well be at work instead of getting in trouble…If I wasn't working… I could just be in the wrong place at the wrong time or something.
> **Sakeena:** So are you telling me that working is like a way of staying out of trouble?
> **Rajon:** Yeah. I'm keeping myself out of trouble you know.

I spent some time observing Rajon in his English classroom at Quahog High School during his senior year. He was a quick learner, worked fast, and often finished his work early in class. The work in his Advanced Placement English course was not as academically demanding as the work we completed in the WCL. As such, he rarely had homework.

Between our third and fourth interview, Rajon began working at a local fast food restaurant. He worked long hours and I was concerned that he was not getting enough sleep. Therefore, I asked why he had a job. At this point, I had known him for almost a year and he did not have a job, at least for the duration of our relationship. Rajon was always clean, fed, and well dressed whenever I saw him. As I began to pull back the layers of why he was working, I came to realize that he was working to stay out of trouble. Unfortunately, Rajon knew too many friends who became fatal victims because they were at the "wrong place at the wrong time." Rajon was committed to not becoming a "statistic" so instead of being idle at home or hanging out with his peers "getting into trouble" he decided that he might as well get a job to fill all of the "free time" that he had in his schedule. By taking care of his schoolwork in school (being a scholar) and working in his "free time" he was "proving people wrong" about young Black men from urban communities. He was being responsible, achieving, and not complaining.

> **Sakeena:** …so yeah you just reminded me so a few weeks ago you [laughs] I think it was like 2 o'clock in the morning [laughs] you sent me this long email.
> **Rajon:** I was bored. I was just up… listening to music and I just started writing it um I don't know yeah… I did that on this though [points to his cell phone and laughs]
> **Sakeena:** Okay so that essay, if I recall, was it was kind of similar to what you did over the summer. Um it was like a more detailed and extended version, but like why were you writing about that at 2 o'clock in the morning?
> **Rajon:** [laughs]
> **Sakeena:** and I'm pretty sure it was a school night if I remember correctly
> **Rajon:** it was [Tuesday night]…I was bored you know then I just started writing…It didn't take me that long to write either…

This excerpt comes from one of our interviews in mid Spring 2014 academic year. As is suggested from the excerpt above, Rajon emailed me late one night at approximately 2:00 am on

Tuesday night (a school night) in February. Rajon emailed me because he said he was bored and could not sleep that night. Therefore, he had time, space, and opportunity to reflect on his life. Rajon and I had several conversations about life and how we grew up. As such, it was not shocking that he would email me in the middle of the night with one of his reflections. His written reflection in the middle of the night was not related to any school assignment. Rather, he knew that he could openly express himself with me and so he did. I am very fortunate that he gifted me with such an opportunity.

Rajon was embodying his writer identity and "staying out of trouble." He was utilizing the intellectual and social safety that we had established almost a year beforehand. As the excerpt also suggested, this reflection he sent was an extension of the thoughts and ideas he revealed in his A LENs essay. As such, the themes were the same; dreams of making it out of Quahog, refusing to become a negative statistic, and going off to college to make a better life for himself and future family.

In our conversation, he told me that he was also able to share his story with his principal. He had gained confidence from WCL that his untold story was a valuable story to tell. When his principal read the story, he shared the story with the superintendent of the Quahog school district. The superintendent (who also knew Rajon personally through a local mentoring program) was impressed with Rajon's story and how he articulated it.

Rajon had perfect timing! It turned that when Rajon shared his reflections with us, the superintendent was also a part of the planning committee for the (then upcoming) education fundraising event in Quahog. As such, they wanted two students to give keynote speeches for the event. The superintendent believed that Rajon's A LENs was perfect for such an occasion, so Rajon was asked to share his at The Amphitheater (pseudonym) in April 2014 for an audience of approximately 750 people with the goal of raising money for the Quahog school district. The audience consisted of students, teachers, principals, school district administrators, university leaders, as well as private funders in education.

According to Rajon, The Amphitheater is an "…important place. A lot of rich people be there." I asked him for a formal invitation to the event. I was so excited that his A LENs, which started in my WCL writing class, was going to be shared to hundreds of people in his the Quahog School District. Rajon was waiting on the final count of how many tickets he had left because "I told my mom and she like gotta tell everybody and she trying invite people. I'm like hold on…" We both laughed and I explained that she was just excited that her son was chosen for such a special occasion. After our moments of laughter, Rajon shared, "I'm scared, I got stage fright. I can't even present in class" and I remembered that to be true from the WCL writing class. He never wanted to speak in front of the class, even though many people think he is brilliant. Rajon was excited that he was selected to share his story, though he was not thrilled about the idea of speaking in front of a large audience.

During our time together that day, he reflected about an experience from elementary school (fifth grade) when he was in a class play. He had stage fright then too. I asked why he feared being in front of people and he said that he was afraid of "messing up." I reminded him that he was a human being. I stuck around later than usual that day. After our formal interview, I helped Rajon practice for his presentation. We went over some basic tips like printing the speech in large print and projecting his voice, etc. During the practice, he said, "I'ma have to man up and just suck it all up! Just do it!" He was both excited and scared to share his story with others. He assured me that I "won't be upset" with him and that he would make us all proud.

A couple of months later, Rajon spoke in front of 750 people in The Amphitheater. I managed to get support from my university to get a tick to the event. Tickets were $150 (for seats in the back). The most expensive tickets were $10,000 for a table. Rajon wore a suit that day; it was the first time I ever saw him in suit. He joked that he looked “sharp” and that he was going to “raise a ton of money” on his “good looks” *and* for “being smart.” We took “selfies” (pictures) with him and his long-term girlfriend, Crystal (pseudonym). The Amphitheater raised $260,000 that night. I received this information in a letter a couple of weeks after the event. This letter was sent to all who attended the event. They had a paragraph in the letter that featured the highlights from Rajon’s A LENs. After his speech, Rajon said, “I’m gonna write a book about my life. I could write in the book about things that changed my life and my vision on stuff. I’ll be writing to express myself, you know, but it’s gonna get an award. You see what writing three pages could get me.”

“I cannot sleep in class”. “The way my mind is set. I cannot go to sleep in class,” Will explained. Furthermore, he said “I consider myself to be a scholar because I do all my work and pay attention.” Doing work and paying attention were embodied manifestations of the serious scholar identity that Will was constructing for himself. Because Will took being a scholar “serious” I often observed him outside of class (in WCL) during study hours with his headphones on while reading a book or typing on his laptop. When I asked Will what he did outside of school, he reported that with his friends he played video games, played basketball, or just sat outside on the porch talking. Recently, he noted, “I just started reading books” because “reading is important.” At first he thought to himself, “I don’t need to read. I can just make it through it, but now I see that reading is important, especially if I want to make it in college.” Reading helped him to “expand” his “imagination and learn more about our history” and “solve problems." For example, he shared that reading *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Inferiority* by Tom Burrell (2009) helped him to think critically about Black inferiority.

> **Sakeena:** *…If you had to think about what was the most rewarding and challenging aspects about being Will Allen, what would you say?*
> **Will:** *I would say, um changing the person who I was.*
> **Sakeena:** *Is that the most rewarding or the most challenging?*
> **Will:** *uhhhhhh rewarding*
> **Sakeena:** *[Laughs] okay.*
> **Will:** *I know when I was little I know I didn't do any work. I brought home D's and F's on my report card. After I say about the 3rd grade I went to summer school for the first time* [Will hits the desk to the cadence of "for the first time"].
> **Sakeena:** *In third grade? That's…*
> **Will:** *Yes*
> **Sakeena:** *Pretty young*
> **Will:** *I know* [laughs]. *So I went to summer school. It was a hot summer and I said to myself, "I'm not doing this anymore." I said "no." I'm not doing this again. So I changed who I was. I started, um doing all my work, paying attention and I'm in a good situation, going to a good high school and I guess that brought me here too.*

This excerpt came from a follow up interview between Will and I. It got at the heart of several intersecting identities for Will. This conversation spoke to the intentionality by which Will worked to maintain a scholarly presence in both Urbantown High School and in the WCL academic enrichment program. It helped me to better understand why Will almost always appeared very serious and/or studious in the summer academic enrichment program. Will was always very respectful, helpful, approachable, and smiling. Yet, he had a serious demeanor when it came to his academics and his embodied scholarly behaviors. According to Carter (2008) "Black students who have a positive racial identity and a critical awareness of racism as a potential barrier to success can develop adaptive strategies for schooling that allow them to persist academically" (p. 14). Will believed that people perceived African Americans as less "smart" or "inferior to all races." By constructing a serious scholar identity and embodying a strong work ethic that involved reading and working diligently outside of class, he was resisting these negative stereotypes. His third grade summer was a signal for him to get his act together. He was intentional to emphasize this critical and unusual point by hitting the desk with his hand in the same cadence of his words "for-the-first-time*."* By this, Will made sure that I understood he was young. It was also important for Will to communicate to me that the conditions of summer school, prompted him to 'change the person he was.' Being in summer school without air conditioning forced him to reflect and conclude, "I'm not doing this again." These beliefs were confirmed in comment about "I guess that (individual agency and meritocracy) brought me here too." In other words, Will constructed an identity that involved causal relationships. When Will brought home D's and F's, he ended up in summer school. However, when he decided to change and bring home A's and B's, his efforts were rewarded. Those efforts produced a 3.9 GPA and landed him in the WCL program. When he made this decision, he also decided that he had the agency to alter his academic outcomes and put himself in a "good situation" furthering his beliefs in individual agency and meritocracy. Will spoke to the agency that he had in his ability to re-invent himself. Noguera (2003; 2008) put it another way, we must acknowledge that individuals have the agency (individual choice) to resist, subvert, and react to cultural and social forces in their environments. Will was activating his agency by resisting stereotypes about Black people, especially Black males. He declared in the third grade, "*I'm not doing this again."* He connected his decision in third grade to his current academic achievement. Going to summer school for the first time in third grade and understanding that "African Americans are not perceived as smart and some people think they are inferior to all races" served as motivating reminders to the importance of high academic achievement. He was proving that he wanted to do "something" with his life. Making a conscious decision in the third grade to be a scholar still affected him years later as a rising senior when we had this interview. He actively "changed who

[he] was." This change, in his mind, is what positioned him to attend WCL and have a 3.9 GPA on a 4.0 scale in his senior year of high school. For Will this was a "good situation" that would ultimately position him to pursue his dreams.

> **Sakeena:** *What's the most challenging aspect about being you?*
> **Will:** *I would say continuing what I'm doing now. I know some days I just want to give up and not do anything,* [but] *lay in the bed all day, not go to school. But I keep pushing.* [I] *keep doing it because I know it will pay off in the future.*
> **Sakeena:** *Um hm. So like what sorts of things like motivate you to like get up and keep going?*
> **Will:** *I say my future. Because I know if I lay in the bed all day, um if I quit school. Where can I end up? I can end up in jail or homeless. I know my mom and dad are not always going to be around and like being on my own, I think that's real scary. So, I do it now so later I won't be in a bad situation.*

Maintaining his serious scholar identity was the most challenging aspect about Will, according to Will. Though Will mentioned wanting to give up, he said he pushed through because he was motivated by his "future." Whiting (2009) would call this attribute "future orientation." Whiting described future orientation as… Looking into the future, he saw "jail" or "homeless[ness]" because this is what he witnessed in Urbantown from other young Black men who he felt were not serious scholars. Being in a single-sex, Black male urban high school is a context where young Black men are constantly reminded of these possibilities. Given the statistics about one in four Black men being a part of the judicial system, it is no wonder that Will feared the probability of this close to home reality. Will associated this with a "bad situation." His witnessed experiences in third grade manifested itself into a serious academic demeanor. At several points in the WCL program, I would ask him why he was so serious or I would ask him to loosen up a bit. He would respond by saying that he just wanted to do his work. It was not until he shared these stories outside of the WCL in our interviews that it occurred to me that Will was "[e]mbodying a critical consciousness about racial inequality in schools and society"

(Carter, 2008). Going to summer school in the third grade was a traumatic experience for Will. In other words, being in summer school had scared Will so much so that this experience created such passion when he spoke about it as a senior in high school.

> **Sakeena:** *Um, what is scary about being on your own?*
> **Will:** *Just like being by myself. No one there to help you. Like when I think about my mom and my dad passing away. My family* [extended pause] *not that close, so it's like if something happen to them, basically I have to take care of me and my sister* [extended pause]. *I have to be the role model.*

Men are supposed to be responsible, providers, and protectors according to Will's outlook. The fear Will spoke of also connected to his intersecting identity as a son and a middle child (brother). Though he was only 17 years old, if something happened to his mother, he would be expected to step up and take care of his sisters. He expressed fear about this role because he was a teenager facing the expectation of being a "role model." He would have to model a position that he has not seen at home due to the absence of his father. As a 17 year old, he feared being the one that is looked at to be the "role model" or the man of the house. Even though Will was the middle child, he had no doubt that he would be expected to be the role model and take care of the family. He did not reject this position because that is not what responsible men do. However, it was not something he wanted to experience at that point in his life. Will was telling us that as the only male in his house, regardless of his age, he was expected to step up and take care of the family.

"I also like to write…that's like a field that I specialize in".

> **Sakeena:** *What sorts of things have allowed you to be successful and get this far?*
> **Shawn:** *…I was like a horrible student in grammar school, upper elementary, junior high school whatever…like fifth through eighth grade it was all about just girls and wanting to be cool… and I'd see my friends at young ages dying and getting shot or like homeless. Things like that kind of opened my eyes to how life is real. So when I got to high school I was just like… I wanted to try something new and you know start over. You try*

> *to change schools. Start a different life. So I say in high school basically I started a different life you know…*

By the eighth grade, Shawn had seen violence, lost family and friends to homicide, and could personally name friends who had become homeless. Because of these lived realities, he was forced to make some decisions at an early age about the life he wanted to live. “Life is real” so Shawn opted to press the reset button and “start over.” Going from middle school to high school provided a prime time for Shawn to reinvent himself into the scholar that he knew he could be. Seeing his peers get shot, killed and/or end up homeless pushed Shawn to start a “different life.” At a young age, Shawn understood all too well the value of life, “life is real.” The transition from junior high school into high school provided a much needed space to reinvent himself toward the goal of a “different life.” Therefore, I wanted to better understand the LENs from which Shawn spoke in our interview.

Eighth grade was an important turning point in Shawn’s life. It was the year his English teacher told him, “We just gon’ let you graduate because we need you to leave this school.” When Shawn shared this in our interview, I involuntarily laughed and said, “Okay, well that’s pretty bold… so they told you that they just passed you along?” Shawn confirmed that I understood his message properly. “Yeah she told me and she told my parents too.” His teacher explained to Shawn and his parents, “we would hold him back, but we can’t deal with him. We want to kick [him] out.” Unfortunately, this interaction with his teacher is not the first time I heard students of color express that their teachers boldly told them that they were “being passed along.” I have seen several students over my years in education internalize those messages and become dropouts. However, Shawn was embodying a different approach to education, which speaks volumes about his resilience. Considering Shawn’s academic success since eighth grade and his Artifactual LENs in the WCL writing class, I wanted to know what led Shawn to consider a career in education. Therefore, I asked him why he wanted to be a teacher.

> **Sakeena:** *Why do you want to be a teacher?*
> ***Shawn:*** *Well, first my football coach told me I should just like do politics. I was like, "nah, I don't want to be like political leader type. He said, "but you like to talk."*
> **Sakeena:** *[laughs]*
> **Shawn:** *I was like, "I also like to write." So I was like I'd rather be a writing teacher, if anything or an English teacher 'cause like that's like a field that I specialize in that I like.*

Despite Shawn's unfavorable experiences in schools, he wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to better understand, what if anything, Shawn did to engage this 'field that he specialized in' so I probed deeper. To my pleasant surprise, Shawn did find ways to become a part of communities that valued his writing identity. He explained to me that he was a part of a young writer's collective called the Young Writer's Club (pseudonym). Shawn joined the YWC in the eighth grade to learn more about newspapers and writing. This program was not affiliated with his middle school and had an explicit aim of cultivating confidence among young writers. The YWC was an independent organization held in the downtown area of his hometown city. At YWC, Shawn was "in charge of the short story part of" YWC. After working with YWC for a couple of years, he made moves to bring YWC to his current high school. He talked with his English teacher to get help with bringing the organization to his school.

In his time at the YWC, he was mentored and eventually started mentoring about 20 young people who wanted to become writers. The program recruited "young writers that want to be journalists or that want to do stories, you know, that want to write biographies and whatnot," according to Shawn. The students who participated in the program were sixth through twelfth grade. His mother's friend introduced Shawn to the program during his eighth grade summer.

When Shawn described the YWC program in our interview, he was smiling and his demeanor changed. His presentation was drastically different from moments before when he was describing his schooling experiences or talking about society's expectations about young Black men. He was more relaxed and he said it was "like perks to it and whatnot you know… You walk inside the building; um it's like papers everywhere like papers all over the walls." The papers on the walls in the YWC building were the young writer's "stories and poems. It was everywhere and they had the person's name on it. It's actually very nice. As it turned out, Shawn generally felt successful at writing and wrote all of the time. He also enjoyed being in spaces with other writers. He even bragged about never getting less than "A's" on his essays in his English class. Shawn said that he always exceeded the word limit expectations in his essays. For example, if he needed 500 words he used to write 700 or 800 because he always had a lot to say about various topics. Further, he said that he would "just dominate the essay." Shawn spoke to the agency that he felt while writing. He felt in charge and in power over his ability to articulate his thoughts in artfully enticing ways to his reader. Shawn explained that his "ideal audience" would be "people my age… I feel like if I made a book full of short stories it would be interesting… I feel like it would make kids wanna read it." He shared that society doesn't want Black kids to read books, so he would make his writing interesting so that Black children would want to read. Shawn shared that his runs in with "bad teachers" or what he also called "dream killers" (teachers who told him directly that he was "not going to be nothing") encouraged him to write a lot. It was more than proving teachers wrong. It was also a way of demonstrating that he came from a long "collective consciousness" of Black writers where "reading, being literate, getting an education… were all acts that affirm one as a human, a person of worth, as somebody" (Perry, 2013, p. 13). The conversation with Shawn's teacher about being "passed along" was undoubtedly dehumanizing, but from his LENs, it also helped him to become more in tune with what brought him pleasure: writing. When Shawn was writing, he was embodying what I came to see as one of the aspects of his truest self. Shawn wanted to share his love for writing with young people, to help them to build their confidence in writing and pursue careers in writing. He was a writer and it was a field he specialized in.

Negotiating Identity: Assessing, Confronting and Rationalizing Tensions

In this section, I discuss how the scholars were negotiating the identities they construct and embody for themselves. By "negotiating," I am paying particular attention to the ways the young men dealt with and rationalized tensions presented (in academic settings) as young Black men. For all of the scholars, negotiating came with particular costs and benefits. In this section, I describe the nature of the tensions they encountered and how they dealt with those tensions.

Table 6.3

Negotiation Identity: Assessing, Confronting and Rationalizing Tensions Scholar Theme Chart

Aaronwick	*"I Wish That I Could Get More Than I Am In My School"*
Rajon	*"Rajon's Got A New Schedule"*
Will	*"I Changed My Mind So Many Times"*
Shawn	*"Football Became My Priority…"*

"I wish that I could get more than I am in my school". Earlier we learned that Aaronwick did not want to associate himself with African Americans in his school due to the social stigma in his school of African Americans being loud and obnoxious or being "slaves." In History class, Aaronwick recalled learning about "topics like Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr.," which only occurred during "Black History Month." Aaronwick admitted feeling deprived of positive images and experiences of Black people. He shared his disappointment by proclaiming, “I wish I could get more that I am in my school.” In other words, he lacked valuable knowledge and experiences about his own history as a Black young man, which made him feel “uncomfortable.”

Choosing to endure in a predominantly White, middle-class school context created access to not only Advanced Placement courses, but it also opened opportunities for “racial ignoring” (Carter Andrews, 2012). While his school offered several Advanced Placement courses, I think it is important to note that his school did not offer an Advanced Placement African American History course. Nor did they make any concerted efforts to address issues of race and ethnicity in the curriculum. School was not a place where Aaronwick could learn about the positive and forward moving contributions of Black people. The culture of the school (perhaps unconsciously through institutionalized racism) perpetuated a social stigma about Black students through teacher practices and the history of Blacks being null from the curriculum beyond a superficial treatment “beyond heroes and holidays” (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002). It also was not a place where he could advance his critical thinking skills through critical dialogue (Freire, 1970) as evidenced by his earlier reflection on our reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “I didn’t think that it was another way of teaching besides the banking method.” These are examples of academic tensions that Aaronwick had to assess, confront, and subsequently rationalize a response to. Aaronwick was negotiating that school was a place where he could not learn much about his culture and history as a Black male. However, his school did offer other valuable resources.

Aaronwick and I had several conversations about purpose and meanings of school in his life. For example, Aaronwick said that he loved to travel and take advantage of opportunities afforded to him through education, especially those on "their dollar." Their dollar referred to institutions like his high school or his (future) university. He expressed that he wished more Black people would take advantage of these opportunities. "Though America has racism and systems in place to keep Black people from succeeding, Aaronwick said "America's definitely the best [country] to be in right now." He went on to explain that he was going to "study abroad in Japan" in the summer 2014 by way of STU's dollar. Summer 2014 would be the summer before his first year as an undergraduate student at STU. He was really looking forward to the trip during our interview. According to Aaronwick, he was just perusing the STU website one day and noticed a study abroad opportunity in Japan "to study Japanese youth culture." Because Aaronwick enjoyed being "cool" and learning, he clicked on a few links and completed the application to study abroad in Japan. He received a notification of his acceptance the next day and he was thrilled to take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad.

> **Sakeena:** Do you think everybody has equal access and opportunity to do what you're doing now?
> **Aaronwick:** No. Obviously I know that that my surrounding is helping me with this situation. The fact that I go to Northwood High School (pseudonym). The fact that my mom makes a certain amount money. The fact that we're in our certain situation…
> **Sakeena:** Well what's the purpose of school for you then?
> **Aaronwick:** um connections and networking…

Here Aaronwick demonstrated how individual efforts (e.g. to study abroad) are situated within larger systems of access, socioeconomic status, and race. Living in a middle class suburban neighborhood, going to a prestigious high school, having a mother as a teacher (in pursuit of a Ph.D. in education) and having an entrepreneur as a father helped to position him to seek Advanced Placement courses, playing Lacrosse and taking advantage of study abroad opportunities. We learned earlier that for Aaronwick, grades were a reflection of his effort, not his intellect. In school, he experienced both racial spotlighting and racial ignoring; or he was negotiating a tension, which leaves him "uncomfortable" and wishing for more. Northwood High School was not a place where he learned about his rich history as an African American. Aaronwick was constructing an identity for himself that was "cool" because he understood that Black males are often negatively profiled and positioned and he refused to be bound by stereotypes. Therefore, school became a means to an end and a place where he was negotiating how he could garner certain experiences, make connections, and network.

Rajon's got a new schedule.

> **Sakeena:** *Now it's November 1st, so it's been a minute. Um what's changed* [since our last session together in September]*, other than your schedule* [laughs]*? Yeah, anyway. So what happened to your schedule?*
> **Rajon:** [laughs] *Oh my schedule got changed because um I was kicked out of a class for like two weeks.*
> **Sakeena:** *What? What? What?*
> **Rajon:** *Let me tell you how it went…. Alright, so look. It's like this class that I don't even need… I'll tell you how I got kicked out. Yeah, so like my girlfriend* [Rajon's girlfriend is also a senior at his High School] *was at the door and I had her paper in my backpack. She needed her paper for a class, so I went and took her the paper* [to the door].
> **Sakeena:** *Um hm*
> **Rajon:** *And then he kicked me out… I knocked on the door to get back in and he handed me this paper like you got to fill out the paper to get back in the classroom… and like on the paper it say like literally it's a shame that your poor judgment in class has gotten you kicked out. Now sit and write a 10 sentence essay apologizing and saying what you're gonna do right. I'm just looking at the paper like I'm not fenna write this…*

About halfway through the middle of the 2013 fall academic semester of Rajon's senior year, I ran into a minor issue with getting a hold of Rajon. I had been to Rajon's school at least three times prior to this particular meeting. By this point the administrative assistant, Mrs. Williams knew exactly who I was when I walked into the school and who I was at the school to visit. Upon my entry into the building she said, "Good morning. Let me call him down to the office to meet you." She glanced at the clock to determine the current school period. Then she looked intensely at her computer while she uttered the following, "I just need to check his schedule to find out which teacher to call." Upon discovering which class he was supposed to be in at the moment, she dialed a phone number on the telephone, which sat behind her computer. However, she did not get an answer. While she was on the phone, I signed into the visitor's booklet. When I finished signing my name, I stood there patiently. We looked at one another with the smile you give another person when there is nothing else to do in a polite situation. I took my seat on the wood bench that faced her desk. Mrs. Williams said, "I'll give it a minute and call again." She explained the students had just transferred classes and perhaps they were still in transition. As promised, she called two more times. On the fourth try, she spoke to a female teacher on the other end and requested for Rajon to come downstairs. I waited for almost 20 minutes after the final successful phone before Rajon arrived to the main office.

When Rajon arrived to the main office in typical fashion he said, "What up, Ms. E?" He gave me a hug and we sat on the bench in the main office. He explained that he was in Art class, as opposed to his English class that I was there to observe. I told him that he needed to go back to his Art class and I would meet him at fifth period during his English class (according to his new schedule). He reluctantly went back to class, claiming they weren't "doing anything" in Art. I left the school building to return two hours later. The aforementioned excerpt captures the beginning of our follow up interview.

When I asked Rajon about his schedule being changed, I didn't expect that he would have been kicked out of class. Because of the nature of the relationship that I have with Rajon as a teacher, mentor, and friend, I was ready to chastise him for being kicked out of class. However, as he began to explain the nature of him being kicked out of class, I became saddened that he had such an awful experience in his Science class. The particulars of the situation are self-reported and I was not there to observe, nor did I speak to the teacher described in the incident. However, his narrative was consistent with several other narratives of students in urban schools who are forced in to *dehumanizing* behaviors or shaming literacy practices.

The conversation above illuminates how Rajon was negotiating the intersections of his scholar identity and his masculine identity. Because he was normally savvy, cool or “always chilling” he casually mentioned that his schedule was changed because he got kicked out. As a researcher, I was transparent about the nature of this research endeavor; to examine critically Black male academic achievement. Therefore, his calm and casual demeanor struck me as odd. Rajon understood my frustration and concern about him getting kicked out of class during his senior year. Because of his allegiance to his girlfriend, Crystal (pseudonym), he went to the classroom door to give “her the paper” that she allegedly needed for her next class. After being kicked out of class, Mr. Cohen (pseudonym) was reportedly insistent that Rajon’s re-entry into the classroom rested on him writing a “Write a 10 sentence essay apologizing and saying what [Rajon’s] gonna do right.” Rajon explained to me that this practice was standard practice, “for the whole class” whenever students did something that broke the rules of the classroom. While disturbing, it was a relief that Mr. Cohen was not only using this practice with Rajon. Moreover, Rajon claimed Mr. Cohen wanted him to write the essay in a desk where he had to “sit in the back of the room and face the back wall in the corner.” This frustrated Rajon so he told Mr. Cohen, “Dude you got me messed up. That's disrespectful.” Rajon refused to participate in the activities suggested by Mr. Cohen. Below he describes his frustrations with Mr. Cohen.

> *Yeah, so then he was like, “get out of my class.” I was kicked out for two weeks because I wouldn't fill the paper out. It's like he so disrespectful about it. Like it got to the point where like my grade went from an A to a D because I wasn't in class. So like um my girlfriend was like, “Alright just do it. Go get it.” I'm like, Can I get the paper?” He's like, “No, you can't even get the paper until you sit down and face the back wall in the corner.” I'm like, “you're crazy.” So we kept just getting into arguments every time I tried to get the paper. Then it's like I just kept getting kicked out. I called him…“a joke know what I'm saying. You abusing*

> *your authority know what I'm saying- trying to degrade people and all that." I told him like straight up, know what I'm saying "You're abusing your authority."*

As a senior in high school who was committed to constructing and embodying a scholar identity, Rajon was very conscious about his grades. Simultaneously, he was concerned about his identity as a young Black man interacting with a White male teacher. The tension that Rajon grappled with was maintaining his grades and maintaining his dignity. Rajon was willing to write the essay (that he wholeheartedly disagreed with) in order to maintain his grades that is until Mr. Cohen insisted that he write the essay in the back corner facing the wall. Rajon said he normally sits in the front of the room, so he can get his work done. Writing an essay that he disagreed within a degrading posture was "disrespectful" for Rajon and that is where he drew the line. He repeated "disrespectful" six times while he explained this situation. The repetition speaks to the angst of his frustration with this negotiation. Rajon was no longer interested in maintaining his A in that class if it meant that he would succumb to disrespect. This situation created dissonance for the identity that he was constructing for himself as a young Black man and as a scholar who took care of his responsibilities. He even consulted with his girlfriend for advice about the matter because it bothered him so much. This was a major negotiation for Rajon. Ultimately, he rationalized that maintaining his grades were not worth being *dehumanized*.

Because he said Mr. Cohen was disrespectful six times, I inquired about which part of this scenario was "disrespectful." While Rajon recalled the details from this experience in class, his body language changed. He sat more erect at the table and he began using hand gestures to point toward the main office area as he explained what happened after he got kicked out of class several times. "We had a meeting [with Mr. Cohen, the principal and Rajon's mother], Rajon said. He was turning red and stuff and I got [my schedule] changed.*" I* asked Rajon if Mr.

Cohen's racial identity played a part in how he perceived his treatment in the classroom. Mr. Cohen was a White male Science teacher in his early to mid-thirties. Rajon said,

> I mean like yeah. He tried to bring up his past like, 'If you need help with anything, just come to me. I didn't really care about high school when I was in high school. I would cut class and do all of that or whatever.' I'm like man, dude you a joke!

Rajon was not interested in having a White male disrespect him because of his identity as a young Black man. Rajon felt patronized by Mr. Cohen by alluding to the fact that they had something in common. Furthermore, Rajon *did* care about school, which is why he was negotiating writing the paper. He felt that Mr. Cohen did not know who he was as a student or person since he was saying that he [Mr. Cohen] didn't care about school when he was Rajon's age.

"I changed my mind so many times"

> ***Sakeena:*** *What sorts of things do you like to do?*
> ***Will:*** *I changed my mind so many times. When I first got here I'm not gonna lie… I was not interested in teaching. Now I'm starting to think about it more… What else? I wanted to go into engineering. I thought about the Air Force to do stuff with computers…*
> ***Sakeena:*** *I know there are things we do for money. Then there are those things that we would do even if we didn't get paid. What are those things for you?*
> ***Will:*** *Honestly [extended pause]. What we're doing with the kids. I enjoy that a lot. In the beginning I was nervous. Like I said I never worked with kids before… When we leave and they give us a hug and show us they learned something from what we did in class and it makes me feel good.*

When I first asked Will about what he liked to do he told me about a series of jobs that he would do for money. They were all viable, successful, and prestigious careers that were in male dominated fields. Perhaps, he did this unconsciously. They did align with his love for math and solving problems. However, when I pulled back the layers into what really made Will feel good about himself, he named teaching as a career. At first, he was nervous due to his lack of experience working with young people. After a while, working with young people and seeing their growth in the Liberty School summer program made him "feel good." Being an electrical engineer or serving in the Air Force are both important and respectable careers. However, Will was negotiating between careers that sounded good to him (and perhaps the outside world) and what actually made him feel good. He negotiated his desires and realities by focusing on an unknown future.

> **Will:** It really made me smile on the inside. Like I said so many African Americans wasting their talents… to actually see them do work, pay attention in class and wanna read books without somebody forcing them to made me feel good"
> **Sakeena:** Good. Now you know how I feel when ya'll say, "Man this book [Pedagogy of the Oppressed] make me wanna read some more…
> **Will:** Yeah I like that they tell us about ourselves. You know stuff we don't know.

Will was big on African Americans not "wasting their talents" and he was always excited to be in the company of other African Americans who wanted to do *something* with their lives. Because Will read books outside of class about Black history and he paid attention to his current surroundings in Urbantown- he believed Blacks were very talented, but they wasted it. He enjoyed both learning and teaching, especially teaching young people who did not have to be forced to "wanna read books." Literacy was something to share (Perry, 2003). African Americans come from a long lineage of achievers and what made Will feel good was sharing in that among other African Americans. He shared that he wished that in Urbantown H.S. they spent more time "problem posing" (Freire, 1970) because it would help the youth be more productive in their own communities: "the kids would learn better" and not "waste their talents."

Participating in WCL may have re-routed Will's trajectory in academic settings. In our last formal interview in at Urbantown High School at the end of the school year, he shared that he made a decision to study Elementary Education in college. At Urbantown elementary (on the first two floors of Urbantown High School) he had opportunities to teach a class of 30 elementary students. He explained that working at Liberty School in WCL in the prior summer helped him to develop his "patience" to work with young people.

"Football became my priority…"

> **Sakeena:** *So are you like still connected with the YWC group?*
> **Shawn:** *Um not really. I don't do it anymore because I've been getting serious about football. It's just like I go down every now and then. Yeah, I think I stopped I would say my sophomore year 'cause football became my priority.*
> **Sakeena:** *Why is football your priority?*
> **Shawn:** *Because I feel like it's gonna pay for my education. I mean I've done my academics thing.*
> **Sakeena:** *But what about your writing skills? So if you um didn't think that football would like pay for education would you be as invested in it?*
> **Shawn:** *Ummm, not really.*
> **Sakeena:** *That's, That's deep! That's deep!*

In the moments leading up to this question in our interview at the beginning of Shawn's senior year at Urbantown, Shawn spoke at length about how much he loved football, he spent countless hours at practice perfecting his position on his school's football team. He even spoke about how he appreciated attention that he received from his coaches, teammates, and of course, the ladies. Yet, when I asked him about his investment in football, he framed football as merely as means to an end. He's a writer, he led a poetry and short story program for young students in his community for a couple of years. He wrote plays and he even informed me that he wanted to write urban fiction novels and become an English teacher. If football were not a way to alleviate the burden of college attendance fees, he probably would not even play. This speaks volumes to the pervasive trope of the *Black male athlete*; a "legible Black masculinity" (Neal, 2013). This should shatter our understandings about the motivations academically high performing Black males have for being on sports teams. Shawn learned that sports can pay for school and then trained to invest infinite amounts of time performing as an athlete when his heart may not even be it. Shawn loved the camaraderie and attention he received from coaches and girls for being in the starting lineup. However, he did not light up the ways he did when he spoke about the writings on the wall at the YWC. Therefore, this was a huge tension. As such, he was negotiating the writer and scholar he wanted to be with prioritizing football. Notice how the institutional discourses about young Black men dictated his actual performance. He prioritized a sport that he believed would pay for his education and put his love for writing to the background instead of doing the things he actually loved to do: write and teach young people. Some argue that Black males only go to school in order to play on football teams. However, Shawn shared with us a different story, an untold story. That is, he played sports in order to go to school, despite having a 32 of 36 of the ACT exam.

This brings us back to what Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) noted; that we must *listen* carefully and closely to *what* students are saying and *how* they are saying it. If I were not listening closely to what he was saying about football, then I probably would not have asked him if he really wanted to play football. Also, notice *how* my question prompted him to think critically about his position as a scholar and a football player. We engaged in dialogic conversation; we actively listened to one another and I asked follow up questions that pushed the conversation in ways that generated new ideas and new understandings. His “umm not really” indicated that he really had not thought about this before, at least not in this way. CNA as a method helped me to pay attention to, understand, and question the ways institutional discourses inform personal narratives. Shawn knew he has purpose (i.e. in writing or in school) outside of sports, but he prioritized football over writing. Shawn was featured on the news for having the most college acceptances from his school.

Fortunately, by our last formal interview at Urbantown High School, Shawn had realized that he didn’t *need* football in order to pay for college. Playing football is not a bad thing.

However, for students like Shawn, he needed to know there were alternatives to college. By the end of his senior year, Shawn was accepted into 37 colleges/universities and amassed over $500K in academic scholarships to cover his attendance. Furthermore, he proudly shared, “I'm looking forward to college” and “I don't care about paying for college” anymore. Shawn also explained that being in WCL and teaching at the Liberty Elementary School reassured his love for teaching young people. It was the first time he actually created lesson plans and executed them. At the Urbantown Elementary School, he took advantage of an opportunity to teach 28 first-graders during his senior year, and he loved it. He also co-taught freshmen English at Urbantown High School. Altogether, his various teaching experiences led him to consider starting a “recreational center and after school program for inner city youth to show them different opportunities.” According to Shawn, “with them being so young it would be an outlet of inspiration.”

Achieving While Black and Male (Discussion)

Black boys and men are enigmatic in educational spaces (Dancy, 2014). That is, people find young Black men in educational spaces to be mysterious or difficult to understand. The unfortunate result is that many young Black men are often misunderstood in classrooms and schools. According to Brown (2011), "for numerous decades, both the findings and theories used to make sense of Black males within the social science and education literature have helped to produce a common-sense narrative about all Black males" (p. 2047), as if Black males are monolithic in nature. As such, Brown encourages researchers to carefully examine the diversity of Black male experiences beyond the “same old stories” or dominant tropes of pathology and difference that have persisted within educational discourse. By documenting and nuancing the scholars’ intersectional identities (over time and across academic contexts), I offer a multi-voiced and more complete “portraits” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of young Black men in schools. In this way, it moves the discourse about young Black men away from these “same old stories” to instead voice some meaningful “untold stories” that might help teachers and education researchers adequately address the needs of Black male students. These untold stories help us to better understand how their identities are shaped by and shape their experiences in schools.

Tatum (1997) explains the “The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 18). Furthermore, she clarifies “The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us” (p. 21). Across both settings (WCL and their respective high schools), the scholars were critically conscious about their identities as Black and male. Carter (2008) explains this CRC “allows Black students to situate their academic and life goals in realities of social inequity. This type of consciousness does not have to result in students internalizing a victim mentality; rather it can ignite academic motivation and perseverance” (p. 24) Noguera (2003; 2008) put it another way; that we must acknowledge that individuals have the agency (individual choice) to resist, subvert, and react to cultural and social forces in their environments. This acknowledgement is important because "there are students who manage to maintain their identities and achieve academically without being ostracized by their peers” (Noguera, 2003, p. 446). Shawn, Aaronwick, Will, and Rajon are prime examples of young Black men who maintained their identities and also achieved academically. Being scholars were not seen as separate from their Blackness or their maleness. Therefore, they were achieving while Black and male. They had the traits of a scholar identity while also maintaining a critical race consciousness. What I show here was how the scholars made sense, enacted, and managed their identities, particularly in academic spaces.

In spending much time with the scholars, I came to understand the scholars were intentional about constructing, negotiating, and embodying particular identities. However, this intentionality does not remove the scholars from “single stories” in dominant discourses about young Black men. For example, learning or being smart was important to all of the scholars. They resisted the notion that a desire to be smart or a life learner was “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Instead, learning was a key feature of the Black masculine identities. They believed that it would not only expand their personal opportunities, but also the advantages of their families and communities. The young men saw learning as an important responsibility of being both Black and being a man. Each of the scholars demonstrated a strong sense of their worth. Because the scholars spent much time confronting tensions about who people *assumed* they were and how they saw themselves, they came to understand their persistence in high academic achievement and staying out of trouble as a valuable part of their identities. They chose to not settle for less. Therefore, they also engaged in hard work and sometimes endured uncaring and unjust spaces (Howard, 2008; Howard & Flennaugh, 2011) in order to prove to themselves and to others that Black young men are worth caring about. They actively sought respect to defy negative statistics and disrupt the “single story” (Adichie, 2009) of Blackness, heteronormativity, and Black maleness. Having intergenerational conversations helped the scholars to develop the confidence and language to disrupt single stories about young Black men.

As revealed earlier through conversations with their parents, teachers, and myself, the scholars engaged intentionally and regularly engaged in intergenerational conversations with adults. These conversations influenced their everyday decisions. The most effective intergenerational conversations (with regard to the scholars’ successful academic performances) were open, direct, and honest. In situations where these conversations were *humanizing* as opposed to dehumanizing, the adults in their lives were thoughtful *and* responsive in the ways they “listened” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) seriously to scholars’ thoughts, inquiries, involuntary utterances, and body language. These scholars maximized opportunities of “talking to learn” rather than talking to merely display what they have already learned (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013). In other words, the scholars appreciated opportunities, especially in academic spaces where they were challenged to develop questions and to think critically.

The scholars wanted to utilize prior knowledge toward the goal of co-constructing or generating new opportunities for further learning. For example, Shawn’s high school English teacher *listened* to Shawn’s excitement about the YWC and encouraged Shawn to bring a branch of the organization to Urbantown High School. He told Shawn that he “was just here for support” and afforded Shawn an opportunity to share his love for writing with young writers. I concluded that all of the scholars believed that grades were a reflection of one’s effort, as opposed to intellect. This understanding was a major factor in the ways the young men engaged with academic spaces.

In sum, the scholars disrupted “single stories” through writing and performative acts. Writing in this study served as an impetus for deconstructing critical theory, naming their realities, constructing particular identities for themselves, and advancing arguments about their positionalities as young Black men in education and the larger society. Enacting these vulnerabilities raised their critical consciousness about themselves and others.

In WCL, the students took an enrichment course on Social Justice Issues. In this course, they learned about the history of African Americans/Black people in America in ways that preceded slavery and they also addressed contemporary issues of in justice (e.g. following the

Trayvon Martin case or deconstructing school funding policies). This is part of what Aaronwick was referencing in the interview excerpt above. Learning about his history in *Social Justice* in combination with my *Writing* course, and the *Examination of Urban Schools and Communities* helped raise his consciousness about the salience of racial identity in his own life. Participating in WCL meant an opportunity of exposure to a different sense of self. He was learning about the inventions of Black people and their status as kings and queens; these were associations that better fit the identity that he was constructing for himself. His words; "I'm just embracing all of that" is indicative of an affirmed association with his Blackness. The "classroom community" (hooks, 1994) we created was conducive to a positive identity construction for Aaronwick. By reading and writing about scholars of color and being surrounded by academically successful Black students, he was enacting a type resistance against a single story about Black males. He was intentionally disrupting single stories about Black males through this resistance.

CHAPTER 7: #BlackLivesMatter-[10] (Conclusions, Recommendations, and Reflections)

The purpose of this cross-context, critical ethnographic case study was to explore how writing might function as a catalyst for understanding the scholarly identities and educational experiences within a sample group of academically successful Black male students. This study intentionally and unapologetically centers the voices of academically successfully Black male students; those voices are complex and work to disrupt *single stories*. Exploring their writing (as an entry point) provides important "focal points" and "a lens" through which to better understand their perceptions of their own scholarly identities as racialized and gendered beings. As established in Chapter 2, there is a need for more research that examines the writings and educational experiences of academically successful young Black men in secondary classroom settings during the academic school year.

By exploring the scholars' educational experiences in WCL and interrogating their educational experiences in their respective schools, I provided some important cross-contextual nuances for educators to consider in their work with young Black men in their classrooms. These cross-contextual nuances provided insight about what mattered to young Black men as they construct, embody and negotiate scholarly identities in and across academic spaces. Therefore, I was able to analyze, interpret, and synthesize ways to encourage, support, and sustain these scholarly identities among young Black men. In doing research with young Black men, I endeavored to reveal the substance of Black life for young Black men. The field needs for more scholars to document the nuances of Black male lives, especially those who manage to navigate educational systems in relatively successful ways.

This research utilized critical narrative analysis of qualitative data. I first offered the scholars' Artifactual LENs essays (see Chapter 5). I supplemented the scholars' Artifactual

LENs with in-depth interviews. Participants in this study included four Black male high school students. In *Phase I*, the scholars were rising seniors in high school. In *Phase II*, the scholars were seniors in high school. The collected data was coded, analyzed, and organized first by research question, then by analytic categories, and then thematic subcategories. As a reminder, this study was based on the following two research questions:

- In what ways might artifactual literacies education narratives (A LENs) function as a catalyst for unpacking the educational experiences of academically high performing young Black men?
- How do these young men (a) construct (define & make sense of), (b) negotiate, and (c) embody scholarly identities as raced and gendered beings?

Analytic categories are directly aligned with each of this study's research questions. The analytic categories are (1) Artifactual LENs and (2) intersectional identities. The same analytic categories were used to code the data and present the findings in Chapters 5 and 6 by thematic subcategories: (de)humanizing stories, (myths of) meritocracy stories, and refusal stories as well as constructing, embodying, and negotiating identities. The purpose of Chapters 5 and 6 were to present the findings from the data. In this chapter, I provide interpretive insights into the findings. The previous findings broke down the stories of the data into analytic categories. However, the goal of this chapter is to provide a cohesive and more complete understanding of the stories. In this way, I provide a layered synthesis of the two previous chapters by integrating the literature on Black males.

Altogether, there were three levels of analysis. In the first level of analysis, I searched primarily for the emerging themes in the individual scholars' writing, specifically in their Artifactual LENs. Next, I searched for themes in their individual in-depth interviews about their

Artifactual LENs. Afterward, I searched for connections between the Artifactual LENs, in-depth interviews, videos from class, and my field notes. At the conclusion of the first level of analysis, I pulled out significant stories from the young men about their educational experiences.

As a secondary level of analysis, I looked across the scholars' Artifactual LENs, interviews and field notes. At that point, what emerged were some similarities across the scholars with regard to the types of stories they were telling me. Therefore, I established the second analytic category (intersectional identities). What I noticed across the analytic categories were the thematic subcategories: (de)humanizing stories, (myths of) meritocracy stories, and refusal stories as well as constructing, embodying and negotiating identities. In the third level of analysis, I tied in relevant theory and research issues raised in the literature that I noticed among and between the scholars.

Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Education

With the increasing cultural diversity of the nation's public schools, many scholars have argued the significance of Teacher Education (TE) programs having an explicit focus on issues of diversity *across* the curriculum as opposed to in one or two courses and field experiences. While specialized programs and concentrations that prepare prospective teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners are instrumental, I agree with Nieto (2000) who asserts, "We can no longer afford to teach only specialized teachers about children of diverse backgrounds. All courses need to be infused with content related to diversity, from secondary math methods to reading" (p. 183). It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore racial disparities in academic achievement. Even though populations of students of color (racially, ethnically, and linguistically) are increasing exponentially, the majority of the teachers in the U.S. are White (Sleeter, 2008). There is a dire need to critically examine what works and what has the potential to work when it comes to preparing our teachers to teach ever-evolving, diverse populations of students. One of the unfortunate realities about taking up issues of cultural diversity, particularly in TE classrooms, is that diversity is often thought of as independent from the curriculum, as opposed to being embedded in the curriculum itself.

According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), culturally responsive teachers embody six stranded traits: (a) socioculturally conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. These six strands consist of the knowledge, skills and dispositions teachers should have in order to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds. The strands outlined by Villegas and Lucas (2002), represent the interconnectedness of the organizing framework of their infusion curriculum proposal; they centralize diversity, rather than sideline diversity.

Milner (2009) builds from the work of Villegas and Lucas (2002) and asserts preparing teachers to teach is about teachers building a repertoire of knowledge, attitudes, mindsets, belief systems, and skills for success through a teaching journey: teachers develop cognitive and analytical skills to continue learning through processes of improving their work. Milner suggests that all teachers should have a curriculum that incorporates “relevant conceptions” around issues of diversity. Milner emphasizes (1) concepts that *all* teachers need to know before they enter the classroom and (2) calls teacher education programs to better prepare TE students for more complicated matters of diversity that they will continue to face in the U.S. society’s public schools. In this dissertation, I illuminated some of the ways the scholars understand and construct knowledge. Therefore, I offer some concrete recommendations for teacher education programs (pre-service teachers), teachers, and schools (in-service teachers).

Based on my assessment of findings from Artifactual LENS (analytic category 1), I recommend that teachers need to be intentional about creating “socially and intellectually safe spaces” (Lee, 2006) where students have opportunities to critically engage their lived experiences within and through the academic curriculum that honored their racialized and gendered experiences. Artifacts present interesting opportunities for students to access and articulate their experiences in schools and perhaps across content areas. This will require a reframing on how we define rigor in the classroom. It will also require some professional development support for teachers (through schools and teacher education programs) to learn about ways to theoretically and practically integrate their discipline-specific content into the curriculum. Teachers could be rewarded by their schools (i.e. professional development hours) for learning about and incorporating socially and intellectually safe spaces in their classrooms, especially for their Black male students.

This study suggests the scholars thoroughly enjoyed opportunities to explore aspects of their identities in the classroom that are often left out of the classroom. We need to welcome their whole selves into the classroom and provide creative outlets for young Black men to engage critically in academic assignments. When the scholars had established trust and respect for their humanity, they went above and beyond to complete assignments. More importantly, they were able to become more confident in constructing particular identities for themselves in unapologetic ways. For example, Rajon and Shawn openly identified as writers. When I affirmed that side of their identities, Shawn opened up to me about his time in YWC and Rajon sent me emails months after our formal time together to write more about his life. He confessed that he wanted to write a book and appreciated the opportunity to be openly scholarly and "manly."

My understandings of intersectional identities (analytic category 2) leads me to recommend that schools create and/or revise incentive structures for learning about and valuing the lives and cultures of students. As Shawn noted, schools demonstrate their values by what they choose to invest in. I recommend that schools invest in student-centered evaluations of teachers, so as to foreground the "learning curriculum" of students (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In collegiate settings, we afford undergraduate students opportunities to evaluate their instructors. In like manner, I suggest that students in K-12 settings have opportunities to evaluate the quality of instruction by their teachers. These evaluations should happen at least on two points in a given academic cycle (mid semester and the end of the semester or year as appropriate). These evaluations should not be used to punish teachers. Rather, they should be used as opportunities (1) to teach the students about the elements of quality education and (2) allow teachers to see through a different LENs. Aaronwick, Shawn, Will and Rajon appreciated opportunities to critically engage in dialogue and writing about ways to improve schools. They felt valued when they were equipped with language to describe and assess quality pedagogical practices. When we collectively (as a WCL staff) equipped the scholars with language to define and defend themselves, the quality of their work and critical thinking skyrocketed. The questions on the evaluations could ask students if they feel "safe" in class, if they have creative ideas and projects they would like to do concerning the content area, or about their most/least effective assignments in the given cycle. These evaluations should be utilized as another data point to inform teacher instruction and engage students. I believe that more teachers than we realize genuinely want to be better teachers. However, they may be teaching (perhaps unknowingly) in ways that do not allow students opportunities to acknowledge their humanity and maximize opportunity for critical engagement. As I demonstrated in this study, the scholars' creativity and depth in intellectual thought were activated in important ways when the curriculum centered them as students.

Students could also play a vital role in identifying the teachers who provide academically rigorous and intellectually safe spaces. This might be utilized to provide public acknowledgement of these teachers at a school assembly. Administrators could also provide opportunities for student-recognized teachers to observe and mentor other teachers in the building. The goal here is to acknowledge, value, and *normalize* the student voice within the formal structure of schools in non-punitive ways.

I recommend that teachers provide more opportunities for artifactual project-based learning that involves students' lives. The scholars were critically engaged with the content, process, and impact of the A LENs projects. We worked on this project for four weeks and each stage of the process built on the previous stage. Seeing the complete project and affording opportunities for the students to reflect on the process both interpersonally and intrapersonally extended their learning in meaningful ways. I noticed in my follow up interactions with the scholars during the academic school year that they still utilized some of the content and experiences from the Artifactual LENs project. Artifacts are rich in meaning and are memorable. In other words, engaging in a project that included their lives created some lasting impressions on the students' academic experiences during the school year. Projects like Artifactual LENs can be adopted for various academic disciplines (i.e. math, history, social studies, science) and utilized for all age groups. Plus, this would not only benefit the academically high achieving Black male students, it would also provide opportunities for those students who are considered low achieving students an access point to reveal their intersectional identities in important ways for the student and teacher.

I want to remind the reader that this study did not highlight Black male failure. Rather, it sought to understand what we could *learn* from academically high achieving Black males so that we could meet the needs of all Black male students. The scholars in this study provided valuable insight about a variety of attributes and activities that attract Black male students in classrooms. As a reminder, the scholars represented in this study came from a variety of family backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds and school contexts. Their stories were “multivoiced” (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). When they feel listened to and seen, they began establishing invaluable insights about the “illegible masculinities” (Neal, 2013) or ‘enigmatic’ nature of (Dancy, 2014) of Black males in academic spaces. This work intentionally addressed the narrow constructions of Black masculinities and scholarly identities for Black male youth, especially in English classrooms where Black males are often positioned as “barely literate” (Kirkland, 2009). We need to better understand the constructions, embodiments, and negotiations Black males engage in within schools and communities.

Shawn, Rajon, Will, and Aaronwick were all academically high performing Black male students. However, they all understood how fragile that positioning was. Each of them understood assumptions about Black males, which is why they fought so actively to resist negative stereotypes. Furthermore, they understood how at *any* given moment, they could easily end up in the “low achieving” circle. Rajon’s interaction with Mr. Cohen and how his grade (as a rising senior) went from an A to D in a two-week period evidenced the instability of high academic performance. Had that been a required course and in his junior year when colleges were paying particular attention to academic grades, his outcome could have been drastically different. Will and Shawn evidenced this by being in both the low achieving and high achieving academic circles. Aaronwick also showed us this when he felt a bit "strange" in the beginning of classes until teachers saw that he is "cool." Altogether, we see how the assumption of Black males in classroom, at least from the LENs of Black males, is that of a successful college-bound scholar.

At the same time, I must also remind the reader about the consequences of success. The scholars described the consequences of success as an uphill battle of proving people wrong and constantly defining themselves against of negative ideologies. This work is draining! In what ways, are we helping young Black men in our classrooms to navigate these spaces? As teachers we can be more intentional about addressing issues of inequality in our classrooms. This will help Black male students to establish some social and intellectual safety in our classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study considered the academic experiences of four young Black men from three different school districts across two states. Due to the small size of participants in this study, I would recommend expanding this study to include a larger number of Black male participants who are academically high performing in mainstream secondary classrooms. I encourage the use of artifacts, writing, and critical dialog as an entry point for understanding the academic experiences of young Black men in schools.

There is also a need for more inter- and multi-disciplinary studies involving enrichment activities of academically successful Black male students in both longitudinal and cross-contextual ways. These studies should further consider the sociocultural and perhaps cognitive impact or benefits of writing. Another consideration for future research concerns the terminology that we use to describe students. I struggled with "high achieving" and "high performing" because in their respective schools, the young men enacted particular performances (high grades), but they were not "achieving" as much as they could because the curriculum, in my assessment, was not academically rigorous and did not center students' lives. Even Aaronwick's highly regarded (according to state measures) White middle-class suburban high school, according to Aaronwick, engaged in many "banking" practices. This means that he learned important academic assessments in his class and successfully regurgitated them back to his instructors on paper. However, it was not until he spent the summer at WCL that he learned how to think critically for himself through his coursework.

Reflections

I started writing this dissertation years ago because Black lives matter. When I started writing, there wasn't a hashtag for Black Lives, yet I always knew in my heart that Black Lives Matter.[11] My experiences as a Black female student in Title I urban public schools in New York City (K-12 grades) and engaging in interdisciplinary undergraduate studies at Cornell University, contributed to my keen awareness of the multidimensional influences that theory, research, and practice have in shaping the schooling experiences of students. As an English teacher in a Title I urban public middle school, I grappled with the absence of support for my students' diverse identities in the curriculum. Therefore, in my doctoral work, I have become invested in student learning and teacher preparation.

In fulfilling this investment, I have maintained my connections to the classroom with young people. I designed and executed writing curriculum (for the past six years) for my students in ways that demonstrated that their lives matter. This dissertation is one manifestation that attempts to capture my value for youth in general and Black lives in particular. This is indeed a labor of love. The other part of fulfilling this investment has been in teacher preparation. I have taught teachers (pre-service and in-service) and secondary students across multiple contexts. My goal in this area is to assist in developing highly qualified and competent teachers, who value students' lives. It is my understanding that students' lives *are* a part of the curriculum, as opposed to separate from the curriculum. I am concerned about the intersectional identities and experiences of academically successful Black males, especially as they engage in writing in *and* across academic contexts; I use literacy to critically investigate the ways these students navigate academic spaces. Therefore, I sought to (1) understand effective literacy environments for these students (from the students' perspectives), (2) design evidence based solutions that are *socially and intellectually safe for students* (Lee, 2006), and collaborate with teachers to foster *culturally sustaining* (Paris, 2012) and *humanizing* (Paris & Winn, 2014) classroom spaces.

Aaronwick, Shawn, Rajon, and Will are four Black male scholars who came from three different school districts. They offered a variance of perspectives on issues of discourses in education, meritocracy, and institutional racism, and how those concerns impacted their intersectional identities as young Black men in schools. Because there is no shortage on dismal statistics about young Black men's failures, I think it is important that we acknowledge, listen to, and value their lived experiences in schools. These young men have managed to navigate school systems in seemingly successful ways. You have had an opportunity to acquire a "corrective lens" into their triumphs and trials. Their journeys through schools were not easy and I have attempted to nuance some of the ways the scholars constructed, negotiated, and embodied scholarly identities across academic spaces. Their stories cultivated more complete stories about young Black men and they also disrupted single stories about young Black men. Their stories should give us some pause when we make assumptions about young Black men, especially in academic settings. Many of them walk in the door feeling like teachers think, ‘oh I got this Black kid…’ or ‘we are frowned upon’ or ‘they see us as criminals in the making.’ In what ways are we being upfront and honest with Black male students in our classrooms from the first day of class? These are very real thoughts the scholars had in academic settings. How can we address these insecurities and affirm their identities and let them know they are valued? How might we open the creativity door for them to explore themselves as a part of the curriculum, instead of in opposition of it? This speaks to the need for more research in this area with this population. This work is also unique and contributes to the field in that it critically examined the ways young Black men in secondary mainstream classrooms grapple with issues of identity as they (successfully) navigate academic spaces. This work was anchored in the scholars’ literacy or Artifactual LENs.

Two crucial findings of my dissertation are (a) metaphors function as a powerful catalyst for unpacking the racialized and gendered literacy identities of the young men, especially in spaces where teachers validated such identities and (b) intersectional identities was leveraged to assert agency in their academic and non academic communities. These findings deepen our understandings about Black male youth’s literacy practices and they shed light on ways teachers can recognize, cultivate, and sustain scholarly literacy identities among their Black male students.

Throughout the dissertation, I had candid, open conversations with the young men about school, life expectations, etc. From the beginning, I expected them to be scholars and treated them as such. We had conversations about critical theory. We read books and articles. At no point did I feel like I needed to "dumb things down" for them. What I noticed is that each of these scholars had a depth and breadth of local knowledge in a broad range of concepts. We came together to "name" certain concepts like banking, problem posing, cumulative risks, segregation, meritocracy etc., but the scholars *lived* these things. Once I (and other instructors) provided explicit language through reading, writing, and verbal discourses, they were quick to begin to name these concepts because they were living them. These scholars were not naive and unknowing empty receptacles.

It is my understanding that because the young men occupied such complex intersectional identities as young Black men, they were somewhat forced to understand the world at a young age as raced and gendered beings. Their parents, siblings, other family members, teachers, etc. helped them to understand a type of socialization that positioned them to read, write, and engage in a world with complex lenses. This dissertation was an attempt to view and investigate their worlds from their perspectives. Some of my conversations with the scholars far exceeded the depth and breadth of conversations that I've had with some of my undergraduate students in my teacher education courses. Middle-class white females from suburban communities primarily occupy these courses. This is not mentioned to somehow invalidate, demean, or subvert the lived experiences of my undergraduates. Rather, I'm attempting to reveal how some of the complex positioning of my scholars equipped them to construct, negotiate, and embody particular engagements in schooling spaces in interesting ways. These insights hopefully provided effective entry points of understanding and dealing with young Black men in our classrooms and in society. It is an expressed goal of mine to humanize these scholars and Black men in general.

I assert that as a large society, Black men are not seen as or treated as humans, which I believe contributes to the callous and now normalized ways that we treat Black young men. I remember when it was shocking to observe someone dying or being murdered on a screen. Now, it seems *normal* to see young Black men killed on video as evidenced by Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and several others. If it is indeed normal for Black lives to be taken on video, often times without a murder indictment or criminal charge, then of course it is acceptable for young Black men to receive inferior access to opportunities to engage in schooling that helps them to think critically or be recognized as fully human. We have a responsibility as teachers to directly address these issues in our academic settings.

There are many negative stigmas and research that regarding all of the ways that Black males fail. I think it is time for us to move beyond that and focus on the other side. I wanted to document that there are academically high performing young men, because it seems that a great number of people do not realize that students such as the scholars included in this study exist. For many people in the summer program, WCL proves that academically successful young Black men do exist, they do go to college, they get good grades, and more importantly, are critical thinkers who believe they have valuable things to contribute to the world. They are human and they have high academic outcomes. In my work, I wanted to acknowledge their existence, humanize these young Black men, complicate notions of what is considered as high performing, and nuance the understandings we have about them. I also focused on factors that contributed to the construction, negotiation, and embodiment of their experiences toward the goal of developing opportunities for (pre) service teachers to address two main concerns when it comes to working with students that have diverse needs. In the literacy strand of my research, I used a literacy lenses to critically investigate the ways academically successful students navigate academic spaces. I worked to build capacities for learning and instruction in ways that were in solidarity with students. I was particularly interested in urban Black males' academic writing and the ways they speak about (i.e. understand and make meaning of) their own writing *across* settings. I know that when we believe in students and provide them scaffolds within a rigorous curriculum they will step up to the challenge. They often far exceed our expectations. In this way, it is important to make students' lives a part of the curriculum; not in opposition to the curriculum or as an afterthought of the curriculum.

I was born in Brownsville, Brooklyn and was raised in Bed Stuy "Do or Die" Brooklyn. My elementary and middle schools were both in Bed Stuy. I went to MLK high school- a place where some people think of the students as failures or throwaways. We lived on a low-income. When I went to college, I did not know anyone in my immediate surroundings who went to college, not to mention a person who had a Ph.D. According to most statistical measures, I should not be here and doing this work. There are a number of reasons why I sought a Ph.D. However, I am only going to discuss one of those reasons right now that concerns educators/mentors. I am fortunate that I had teachers along the way who saw things in me that I could not see in myself. Many educators/mentors along the way (K-Ph.D.) took time to invest in me and cultivate sincere relationships with me. They did not "save" me. They believed in me, which helped to believe in myself. They knew their content. They listened to me. They modeled for me how to do certain things and introduced me to different opportunities. They had high expectations for me and they treated me like I was important; they valued *my life*. I was equipped with language to define and defend myself. These same educators/mentors are intentional about helping me when I mess up or fall short, and I am endlessly thankful.

As educators, we must be mindful of *how* we talk to young people. We need to be intentional about *what* we say to young people, regardless of the types of communities they come from. Students know when you do not care about them and choose not to invest in them. I hope that my life, pedagogical practices, and research in education helps educators/mentors realize how much influence they can have in the lives of young people. I am one of the products of the genuine generosity of several educators/mentors.

I would like to end this chapter with a poem that has meant much to me as I think about my transition into academy as a faculty member. This poem, written by Rae Paris was so timely and effective. It captured the sentiments of love, shared struggles, and humanity, all of which I have been working toward for years in my quest toward higher education. This poem captures how I felt toward Aaronwick, Shawn, Rajon, and Will as I taught them in the WCL, learned with them the during the 2013-2014 academic school year that I spent with them and even now as I attempt to mentor them through this process. It captured the sentiments of love, shared struggles, and humanity, all of which I have been working toward for years in my quest toward higher education. This poem captures how I felt toward Aaronwick, Shawn, Rajon, and Will as I taught them in the WCL, learned with them the during the 2013-2014 academic school year that I spent with them and even now as I attempt to mentor them through this process.

An Open Letter of Love to Black Students: #BlackLivesMatter

by blackspaceblog

Black students and professors, Beaumont Tower, Michigan State University, December 6, 2014. photo by Darryl Quinton Evans

We are Black professors.

We are daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces, nephews, godchildren, grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, and mothers.

We're writing to tell you we see you and hear you.

We know the stories of dolls hanging by nooses, nigger written on dry erase boards and walls, stories of nigger said casually at parties by White students too drunk to know their own names but who know their place well enough to know nothing will happen if they call you out your name, stories of nigger said stone sober, stories of them calling you nigger using every other word except what they really mean to call you, stories of you having to explain your experience in classrooms—your language, your dress, your hair, your music, your skin—yourself, of you having to fight for all of us in classrooms where you are often the only one or one of a few, stories of you choosing silence as a matter of survival.

Sometimes we're in those classrooms with you.

We know there is always more that people don't see or hear or want to know, but we see you. We hear you.

In our mostly White classrooms we work with some of you, you who tell us other professors don't see, don't hear you. You, who come to our offices with stories of erasure that make you break down. They don't see me, you say. They don't hear me. We know and don't know how to hold your tears.

How do we hold your tears, and your anger?

You are our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our mothers, our fathers, our godchildren. You, with your stories of erasure break our hearts because you are family, because your stories of erasure ultimately are stories of violence, because your stories mirror our experiences, past and present.

Right now. This is all happening now. Every day. We know this.

We want you to hear.

You tell us your stories and sometimes we tell you our own stories of cops who stop us on the way to work, of grandparents born in Jim Crow, of parents born during segregation into an economic reality that made them encourage us to get solid jobs, of parents born outside the United States who came face-to-face with the harsh reality of U.S. anti-Blackness, how we chose institutions where we often feel alone. We tell you stories of almost dropping out of school, stories of working harder than anyone else even when it felt like it was killing us, even when it is killing us. We tell you we know historically and predominantly White universities might let you/us in, but they don't care much about retaining us no matter how many times they misuse pretty words like diversity, or insult us with the hard slap of minority.

We tell you about the underground network of folks who helped us, the people who wrote us letters, the offices we cried in, the times we were silent, the times we spoke up, the times we thought we wouldn't make it, the people who told us to hold on. We tell you over and over about the railroad of Black professors and other professors of color who we call when we know one of us is in need. We remind you skinfolk isn't always kinfolk. We tell you to be careful. We tell you to take risks. We tell you, guard your heart. We tell you, keep your heart open. We tell you to hold on. Hold on, we say, to you, to us, because holding on to each other is everything, often the only thing.

Hold on.

We want a future for you, for us right now.

We write this is in solidarity with the families of Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Stanley Jones, and so many others who they are killing, so many others who should have had the chance to be in our classrooms, who should have had the chance to simply be.

We write this in solidarity with Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and too many others stolen and gone, too many others who fought for us to be in this privileged place where we still have to fight for justice.

We write this in solidarity with The Combahee River Collective and #BlackLivesMatter who knew and know we have to fight for and love all of us if any one of us is going to survive.

We write this in solidarity with you, Black students, here and elsewhere, and with those on the ground for over 100 days, four and a half hours, two seconds.

The living and the dead. We hear you. We see you.

In our classes we'll continue to do what we've always done: teach about race, anti-Blackness, and White Supremacy. This has and will continue to put us in positions we have to defend. This has and will continue to compromise our jobs, our health, our relationships with other people who profess to be our colleagues. This has and will compromise relationships with partners who tell us with love we need to set better boundaries.

We're trying.

We study ourselves. We study, we live Black lives. We organize. We strategize. We march. We teach to nurture and resist. We don't always talk about the letters we write to administrators, the angry emails we send, the committees and task forces we serve on, the department meetings where we question and push for more, the colleagues who question our research, our presence, our skin, our manner of being. We don't always talk about the weight of pushing for more, more being basic equity, more being the right to exist without explanation or apology, more being the right to love and be loved.

What we do is not enough. It's never enough, but we'll keep on. We'll keep finding ways to do more. For all of us.

We're supposed to say views expressed herein are ours alone, but we believe that truth to be self-evident.

Some people who share our views will not sign this but they're still with us. The living and the dead.

We've never been alone.

You already know your life matters. Know we're fighting with you and for you. With all of us. For all of us.

We got you.

We see you. We hear you. We love you.

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[10] Please see the Garza (2014) article to learn more about the significance of #BlackLivesMatter. On December 6, 2006 Rae Paris shared her poem with the Michigan State University community. It was later signed by thousands of Black professors across the country.

[11] While I was writing the implications and conclusions of my work I found out about Walter L. Scott unarmed black man shot dead while running caught on video in North Charleston South Carolina on April 7, 2015.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Research Participation Information and Assent

Project Title: (Re)imagining Literacy Instruction for Black Youth

Investigator: Sakeena Everett, PhD Student

Department and Institution: College of Education, Michigan State University
Contact Information: 620, Farm Lane, 308 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824; E-mail everet63@msu.edu.
Investigator: Dr. Terry Flennaugh, Assistant Professor
Department and Institution: College of Education, Michigan State University
Contact Information: 620 Farm Lane, 116L Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, Phone: 517-353 9337, E-mail: flennaug@msu.edu

You are being asked to participate in the research study about your schooling experiences and literacy practices in the Summer Scholars High School Program (SSHSP) at Michigan State University. As part of the study, members of the Summer 2013 participants are being asked to participate in the following research project. Your participation will take place over a period of 4 weeks during the summer program and during the academic school year, if agree to participate. During that time you may be asked to participate in two interviews. Each interview will last up to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. However, your name will not be mentioned in any of the audio recordings or transcriptions. You may choose not to participate at all, refuse to answer certain questions, or discontinue participation at any time.

Participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time, refuse to answer certain questions, or discontinue participation at any time. The SSHSP does not give grades during the program, and whether you choose to participate or not will have no affect on your academic grades in your regular school program. All results of this research will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your name or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of this research. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous. The data collected for this research study will be protected on a password protected computer or in a locked file cabinet on the campus of Michigan State University for a minimum of three years after the close of the project. Only the appointed researcher’s and the Institutional Review Board will have access to the research data. Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Participating in this study poses minimal to no risk to you. The only activity you will be asked to do that is not part of your normal work at SSHSP is to respond to interview questions. You and other students in SSHSP and at other universities may benefit as the results of this research study are used to learn more about academic identities and schooling experiences in programs like SSHSP.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the project investigators: Sakeena Everett, email: everet63@msu.edu, mail: 620 Farm Lane, 308 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824; Dr. Terry Flennaugh, email: flennaug@msu.edu, phone: 517 353 9337, mail: 620 Farm Lane, 116L Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at: 408 West Circle Drive Room 207, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I indicate my voluntary consent to participate in this research and have my responses included in the dataset by completing and submitting this consent form. Your signature below means you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature ______________________________ Date ______________

Name (printed) _________________________

APPENDIX B

Research Participation Information and Assent

Project Title: (Re)imagining Literacy Instruction for Black Youth

Investigator: Sakeena Everett, PhD Student

Department and Institution: College of Education, Michigan State University
Contact Information: 620, Farm Lane, 308 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824; E-mail everet63@msu.edu.
Investigator: Dr. Terry Flennaugh, Assistant Professor
Department and Institution: College of Education, Michigan State University
Contact Information: 620 Farm Lane, 116L Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, Phone: 517-353 9337, E-mail: flennaug@msu.edu

You are being asked to participate in the research study about your schooling experiences and literacy practices in the Summer Scholars High School Program (SSHSP) at Michigan State University. As part of the study, members of the Summer 2013 participants are being asked to participate in the following research project. Your participation will take place over a period of 4 weeks during the summer program and during the academic school year, if agree to participate. During that time you may be asked to participate in two interviews. Each interview will last up to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. However, your name will not be mentioned in any of the audio recordings or transcriptions. You may choose not to participate at all, refuse to answer certain questions, or discontinue participation at any time.

Participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time, refuse to answer certain questions, or discontinue participation at any time. The SSHSP does not give grades during the program, and whether you choose to participate or not will have no affect on your academic grades in your regular school program. All results of this research will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your name or other identifying features will not be used in any analysis or in any reporting of this research. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous. The data collected for this research study will be protected on a password protected computer or in a locked file cabinet on the campus of Michigan State University for a minimum of three years after the close of the project. Only the appointed researcher's and the Institutional Review Board will have access to the research data. Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Participating in this study poses minimal to no risk to you. The only activity you will be asked to do that is not part of your normal work at SSHSP is to respond to interview questions. You and other students in SSHSP and at other universities may benefit as the results of this research study are used to learn more about academic identities and schooling experiences in programs like SSHSP.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the project investigators: Sakeena Everett, email: everet63@msu.edu, mail: 620 Farm Lane, 308 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824; Dr. Terry Flennaugh, email: flennaug@msu.edu, phone: 517 353 9337, mail: 620 Farm Lane, 116L Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at: 408 West Circle Drive Room 207, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I indicate my voluntary consent to participate in this research and have my responses included in the dataset by completing and submitting this consent form. Your signature below means you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature ______________________________ Date ______________

Name (printed) _________________________

APPENDIX C

College of Education Summer Scholars Program Writing Class Syllabus

Course Description and Objectives: The goal of this course is to help you expand your writing and research skills. These skills are *essential* for success in college and beyond. With strong writing and research skills you will have many opportunities available to you in a wide range of career fields. In order to reach this goal, you will be reading, researching, creating research, and writing about your own schooling experiences. By the end of the summer, you will be able to critically read, write, and use research in ways that may help improve education for students.

Required Materials:
- Composition notebook
- Pen/pencil
- Dictionary
- Highlighter
- Course readings

Course Requirements:
- Reflective essays
- Research paper
- Research panel
- "Me-search" mapping artifact

Classroom Assignments:

Reflective Essays

Each student is required to submit a 1-page double-spaced reflective essay based on the course readings to gauge the manner in which students are interpreting course content. Reflective essays should not be mere summaries of course readings, but an analysis, reflection and engagement with course readings. Students may be asked to share from their reflections to generate critical questions for class discussion groups. Use the following guideline when writing your reflections. *(Be sure to refer to Reflective Guidelines for specific details):*

1. Analyze. Demonstrate that you have understood and carefully engaged the arguments of the readings *(this should be the bulk of your paper).*
2. Consider how briefly referencing your personal experiences (in K-12 schools or outside of school) might enliven your response AND provide a sense of how you are making broader connections between the readings and the larger social and historical context of schooling.
3. 1-2 Burning Questions

Research Paper

The research paper will make use of library research, course readings, lectures, interviews, group work, artifacts, and personal experiences to critically analyze a theme from the course. Each individual will provide further research on their topic, offer new interpretations, and present creative ways to rethink varying issues involving race, class, and gender in American educational system. We will discuss the length and format in class.

Research Panel
Toward the end of the class, you and a small group of your peers will create a research panel on which you will discuss your writing and research findings. Your individual presentation should be guided by a visual organizer (e.g., PowerPoint) and must last no longer than 10-minutes. On the panel, you will be expected to address questions raised to you about your work. The research panels will take place during our last two class sessions.

Me-search Mapping Artifact
An original artifact will compliment each research paper. Be as creative as possible, think about your own talents, and demonstrate your research in a fun way. The artifact and findings from the research paper will be presented to the class.

Table 8.1

Course Schedule

Course Schedule				
Week	**Date**	**Theme**	**Writing Assignments**	**Reading(s) Due**
1	7/10/13	Introduction to the course	• Introductions/Videos	
	7/11/13	Critical Theory	• Reflective Writing #1: Tatum	• *The Complexity of Identity* by Tatum (5 p)
	7/12/13	Metaphors as a powerful tool	• Reflective Writing #2: Freire	• *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 2 by Freire (16 p)
2	7/15/13	Teaching- What's effective and for whom?	• Reflective Writing #3: Lakoff & Johnson	• Metaphors we live by, by Lakoff & Johnson (11 p)
	7/17/13		• Reflective Writing #4: Research topic and rationale 1-2 pgs. • Reflective Writing #5: Educational experiences	• *Dripping with literacy, a jazz-fueled road trip, a place to breathe* by Zancanella (8 p) • Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching, by Ladson-Billings (7 p)

Table 8.1 (cont'd)

	7/18/13	Gendered Literacies	• Reflective Writing #6: Guzzetti and Kirkland • Research papers	• *Girls zines as a global literacy practice*, by Guzzetti (10 p) • *Inventing masculinity: Young Black males, literacy, and tears*, by Kirkland (9 p)
	7/19/13	Critically Analyzing Writing	• Reflective Writing #7: Tan and Malcolm X	• Mother Tongue, by Amy Tan (6 p) • Prison Studies, by Malcolm X (3 p)
3	7/22/13		• Research Projects • Peer review (Draft 1)	• No assigned reading
	7/24/13		• Research Projects • Gallery Walks (Draft 2)	• No assigned reading
4	7/29/13		• Presentations • Reflective Writing	• No assigned reading
	7/31/13		• Presentations • Reflective Writing	• No assigned reading

APPENDIX D

“Me-Search” Mapping: An Academic Autobiography

Paper Description – Draft 1 July 22, 2013; Draft 2 due July 24, 2013

This work is meant to be a tool for personal, political and intellectual reflection about yourself and its impact on your educational and life experiences. It is important and beneficial for you to continuously assess your personal development, confront your weaknesses, and acknowledge your strengths. The purpose of this assignment is to grant you the opportunity to personally, politically, and intellectually reflect on the content of this writing class and your experiences (or lack thereof). In this paper, I expect that you will utilize course readings, discussions, presentations, etc., to reflect on how you’re processing in this writing class. However, you should feel free to bring in your experiences from any of your classes this summer, even at the Freedom School. Within your paper, please consider addressing areas of personal resistance, new knowledge/perspectives, change, and/or insights.

To inspire your thoughts, please consider questions such as:

1. What do I think of school? What is the purpose of school or education? What has the purpose of school been in my life?
2. What types of activities and engagements do I think happen there? Why do they happen?
3. How have my educational experiences been influenced by my identity?
4. How have my life experiences contributed to my understanding of others and myself?
5. What significant life experiences have I had that have contributed to my perceptions of racial, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. identities in education?
6. How, if at all, can I use education to create new opportunities for myself (and/or the people I care about)?

This paper should include a metaphor that compares your academic experiences to something else. Consider how Paulo Friere compared his thoughts about education to “banking.” When you think about your experiences in education (as a teacher or student), what would you compare it to? This should not be a boring essay, so please tell your stories in full detail and help the reader experience the moment by using sensory images, active verbs, and compelling metaphors. Please include a visual aid to show your metaphor. We will display these visual aids in class on July 24, 2013 when we do our Gallery Walks.

You are expected to use 3-5 readings from your classes. At least 2 readings should be from our writing class this summer. You should cite these authors accordingly, and demonstrate through your writing how you understand their ideas, and the relationship between these ideas and the experiences you are describing.

Writing Guidelines

Title page
3-5 pages, 12-point font
Double-spaced
1-inch margins on all sides
Numbered pages
Include a reference page
APA format for in-text citations and references

APPENDIX E

Writing Skills Research Paper

Paper Description – Due July 29, 2013
You are the best and the brightest youth that Michigan and Illinois have to offer in the research area of your choice. As a researcher, you have the opportunity to investigate (dig deeply) your research interest and use your wisdom to mediate reality concerning that topic.

In your project, I expect that you will engage in ongoing conversations and critical reflections with others. This research project should be informed by multiple perspectives on your given topic. Be sure to consider the social, cultural, historical and other aspects of your situation. In this way, your research humanizes the individual, allowing him or her to realize the equal capabilities and universal intelligences in all humans, while acknowledging the existence of problems as the result of social forces beyond his or her doing (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Students will:

- Select a research topic
- Draft research question(s)
- Investigate solutions to the problem using critical scientific inquiry
- Interview at least two people about the topic
- Submit a written paper
- Present research and findings to the group using multimedia on a research panel

Questions Your Research Should Address:

- What is your research topic? Why did you choose your topic?
- Who are the stakeholders in the particular institution, organization, or community in question (i.e. policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents, students, artists etc)?
- What is important to know about your topic? Why?
- What sources informed your research process and findings? Why? How?
- What methods did you use to conduct your research?
- What did you learn from doing this research?

Your research should have at least 3 sources. The sources you use do not *have to* come from class. However, you can use sources from any of your classes if you want to. You should cite these authors accordingly, and demonstrate through your writing how you understand their ideas, and the relationship between these ideas and the experiences you are describing.

Writing Guidelines

Creative Title
3-5 pages, 12-point font
Double-spaced
1-inch margins on all sides
Numbered pages
Include a reference page
APA format for in-text citations and references

APPENDIX F

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol 1

Interviewer:

"Thank you so much for participating in this project! This interview will take no more than 60 minutes. I'm going to ask you questions related to your background, your attitudes and beliefs about school, achievement, and race. I want to remind you that all your answers will be confidential.

The interview is confidential. That means that I won't share anything you say with anyone else, unless you tell me about a plan to hurt yourself or someone else, or if someone is hurting you. Anything you tell me will be private, and you won't get in trouble for anything you say. Only I will know what you said, so you can be honest. If you don't want to answer a question, just let me know. There are no right or wrong answers—I want to learn what you think. Does all that make sense?

I'd like to tape record the interview so that I can remember what you say, if that's okay with you. Is that okay? You can tell me to turn of the recorder at any point, if you want. I may publish my results as a book or in articles, or I might present the findings at conferences. I won't use your name or any other information that would identify who you are, so you can pick a code name so that I do not use your real name in any part of my data collection.

If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I'll destroy your information. You won't get in trouble for withdrawing. I'm going to give you my information, so you can call or e-mail me to tell me if you don't want to participate anymore.

Do you have any questions?
Is it okay for us to start?

Name: ____

1. Tell me about your high school.
2. What does being in this program mean to you? Why are you here? What motivated you to come to STU for the summer?
3. What aspect of your identity is most important to you? Why? Please explain.
4. Do you see yourself as a literate person? Why? Why not? What does literacy mean to you?
5. How does literacy play a role in your life?
6. What is your favorite/least favorite subject in school? Why?
7. What is the most rewarding/challenging aspect about being you? Why?
8. What, if any advice do you have for teachers about ways to engage their students using literacy?

Wrap-Up

1. Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you would like to add?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

Please Note: This interview protocol is adapted from work of Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews, one of my professors and dissertation committee members. Naturally, I also asked appropriate follow up questions as needed in the conversation. For all of my follow up interviews with the young men in my dissertation, I didn't have a formal protocol at all. Rather, they were open-ended conversations because I knew them quite well at this point. Plus, the artifacts were so rich in meaning that there was a lot to learn. The questions only included follow up or clarifying questions on the artifacts or their lives, their school visits that I did or whatever was going on at the time in the news etc. I knew their families, some of their friends, and they showed me their neighborhoods etc. By the time the school year began 2013-2014, there wasn't a protocol because I had spent so much time with them in the summer program.

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