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Unpacking Voice and Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women and Latinas in College Classroom

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UNPACKING VOICE AND SILENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
BLACK WOMEN AND LATINAS IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

A Dissertation Presented
by
SHELLY A. PERDOMO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2012

Educational Policy, Research and Administration
Higher Education
A Dissertation Presented

By

SHELLY A. PERDOMO

Approved as to style and content by:

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Benita J. Barnes, Chair

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Alexandrina Deschamps, Member

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DEDICATION

Para mi querido padre, Rafael A. Perdomo y mi madre, Yolanda A. Perdomo, cuyas bendiciones, amor y apoyo me dio la fuerza para completar este estudio. Te ADORO! Que Dios me los BENDIGA!

To my beautiful nieces and nephews, Alexa Vargas, Zaiell Vargas, Nicolas Prince and Ryan Prince to encourage you and remind you that anything is possible. Titi Shelly loves you!
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At this time, I would like thank those who have both directly and indirectly contributed to this study and shaped my development as an educator and researcher. Although I wrote and conducted this research on my own, this process by no means was done in isolation. The completion of this research study is the result of a cadre of loving and supportive individuals who encouraged me throughout this challenging, yet rewarding process.

I begin by thanking the Perdomo-Diaz Clan. My Dominican family is my source of strength. Their sense of humor, enduring love, blessings, and patience throughout this process played an important role in the completion of this study. My parents, Tio Amiro, and my dearest sisters, Pura Perdomo, Wendy Perdomo, Shane Perdomo and my hermanito, Horacio Fernandez, encouraged me to do and always be the very best in everything I have undertaken. I am eternally grateful!

I want to recognize the powerful and courageous nine Black and Latina sisters who participated in this research study. Your candidness and willingness to share your personally lived experiences made it possible to create this important research. Without each of you, this research would have never come to fruition.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge my Ancestors and God for providing me with the strength and wisdom to create this research. We did it! Bendiciones!
ABSTRACT

UNPACKING VOICE AND SILENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN AND LATINAS IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

MAY 2012

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Directed by Associate Professor Benita J. Barnes

Questions of voice and silence have come to occupy vitally important places in U.S. educational systems. In American culture, “talking is powerfully associated with notion of individuality, freedom, equality, democracy, reason, intelligence and honesty” (Kim & Markus, 2005, p. 182). However, not everyone communicates her thoughts as fluidly as American cultural values assume; ethno-racial, gender, class, and regional variations exist. By utilizing Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic habitus and Black and Latina feminist theory of oppositional/multiple consciousness, this study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to understand how Black and Latina women experience, understand, and make meaning of their voice and silence in classrooms within a women’s college. The researcher interviewed nine Black women and Latinas to gain an understanding of how they experience, understand, and make meaning of the phenomenon of voice and silence in college classrooms. The study found that 1) voice and silence is an interconnected, multidimensional process of human communication that cannot solely be attributed to cognitive development; 2) nuances of voice (Instrumental Voice, Raw Tongue, and Symbolic Voice) and silence (Engaged Silence, Holding Silence, Silencing/Being Silenced, and Discursive Silence) are influenced by how Black
women and Latina participants experienced and perceived college classrooms, faculty, and student peers; 3) Ethno-racial, gender, class, and regional variations impact how voice and/or silence are employed; and 4) Black women and Latina participants learn to navigate voice and silence in collegiate classrooms to develop an enlightened self.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... v

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... viii

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................... xvi

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. xvii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   Significance of the Study ................................................................................................. 5
   Purpose of the Study ...................................................................................................... 7
   Assumptions .................................................................................................................... 9
   Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 10

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ....................................................................................... 12
   Women’s Colleges and Women’s Academic Performance ........................................... 16
   Institutional Determined Voice and Silence: Collegiate Classrooms ......................... 18
      Summary ...................................................................................................................... 23
   Institutional Determined Voice and Silence: Undoing Racial and Social Inequities 25
      Summary ...................................................................................................................... 32
   Group Determined Voice and Silence: Women and Students of Color ....................... 33
      Summary ...................................................................................................................... 43
   Individually Determined Voice and Silence .................................................................. 45
      Summary ...................................................................................................................... 52
   Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 54
   Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. 55
      Bourdieu’s Theory of Linguistic Habitus ................................................................ 55
Black and Latina Feminism: Oppositional and Multiple Consciousness ........................................58
Summary .................................................................................................................. 61

3. METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................64

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Perspective ......................................................... 64
Research Questions .................................................................................................... 67
Method ......................................................................................................................... 68

Institutional Characteristic ......................................................................................... 68
Noel College ................................................................................................................ 69
Gaining Entry and Securing Student Participants ..................................................... 69
Participants .................................................................................................................. 70

Sampling .................................................................................................................... 73

Data Collection: In-Depth Phenomenological Interviewing ....................................... 75
Data Analysis .............................................................................................................. 77
Thematic Connections ............................................................................................... 81
Trustworthiness .......................................................................................................... 82

Summary ...................................................................................................................... 84

4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES ..........................................................................................86

Eve ................................................................................................................................. 86

Background .................................................................................................................. 86
Educational Transition: From the Inner City School to Elite Preparatory High School ........................................................................................................................... 88
Frustrating and Partly Rewarding at Noel College .................................................... 90
An Anomaly: A Black Woman in Science ................................................................. 93
Understanding Eve’s Academic Voice: Self-Perception vs. What Others Think/External Perception ........................................................................................................... 94
Eve’s Silence ................................................................................................................ 97
Eve’s Academic Experience: A Revelation ............................................................... 99

Dalis ...............................................................................................................................101

Family Commitment and Values ............................................................................ 102
From Puerto Rico to the United States: Social Identity and Secondary Education ................................................................................................................................. 103
English vs. Spanish: Academic Language vs. Emotional Language ................. 105
Social Justice and Community Organizing: Pathway to Higher Education ......... 106
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noel College: A Bitter Sweet Experience</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Raw: Clashes and Confrontations in the College Classroom</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the Collegiate Classroom: Risk and Responsibility</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence: A Conscious Choice with Multiple Meanings/Reactions</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La educación formal es una Bataya, Siempre Metiendote de cuña:</em></td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Education is a Battle, Always Forcing Yourself in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issy</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From English to Spanish: Cultural and Linguistic Transitions</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escaping a Culture of Violence: Education as a Means of Survival</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hardships and Struggles of Noel College</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Manifested Through Silence and Participation</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Outsider Within: Issy’s Reflection of Noel College</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimora</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Success and Educational Legacy</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Confidence and Maintaining Self-Efficacy: A Mother’s Educational</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating Kimora Within Jamaica’s British Educational System</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending Noel College: Racial Consciousness and Participation</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the Collegiate Classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Noel College</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violeta</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Background</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Adversity: Family Sacrifices for Educational Advancement</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biculturalism: Acknowledging Cultural Differences, Negotiating Multiple</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism Through Social Elitism: Living in Dominican Republic</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violeta’s High School Experience in Dominican Republic</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contested Space of Noel College: Academic Progress and Racial Challenges</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You are damned if you, and damned if you don’t”: Participation</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Collegiate Classrooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Silence</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitterly Gratifying: Reflections of Noel College</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoli</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Education Cut Short: Motherhood and Struggles</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College: Yoli’s Path to Higher Education</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Type and Academic Performance: Noel College vs.</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Perception and Institutional Type</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Classroom Dynamics: How Professors of Color Shaped Yoli’s</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections of Noel College: Resources and Career Opportunities</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Lessons and Educational Attainment: Relocating for</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and Gifted at STEM Institute</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation as a Risk at STEM Institute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter and Discomfort: Coping and Learning Within the</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiate Classrooms of Noel College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel College Helped Me Value My Education</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushed Through the System: Jada’s Early Educational Experience</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Extremes: Jada’s Collegiate Classroom Experience</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Within the Classroom: Faculty Development and Student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel College: A Necessity, Not an Option</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikki</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Mother’s Absence: Family Unity and Support</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Catholic School to Home Schooling: Challenging Traditional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Norms for Self-Expression</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Columbia to the United States: Education and the Micro, Meso,</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro Levels of Racial Consciousness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven Towards Educational Success: Group Representation vs.</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Experience at Noel College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikki’s Silence and Voice: A Different Academic and Cultural</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Choice</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. FINDINGS</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Linguistic Habitus of Black Women and Latinas</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Tongue in High School</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in High School</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDICES

A  LETTER TO THE DEAN OF STUDENTS AT NOEL COLLEGE .................. 295
B  INVITATION LETTER TO BLACK WOMEN AND LATINAS .................. 296
C  INVITATION LETTER TO CO-CHAIRS OF CULTURAL
    ORGANIZATIONS ....................................................................... 297
D  RECRUITMENT FLYER .................................................................. 298
E  INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .................................................................. 299
F  RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM: CONSENT FOR
    VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION ......................................................... 300
G  PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM ................................................. 303

REFERENCES ....................................................................................... 304
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pre-Collegiate Experience</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Collegiate Experience</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

1  Navigating Voice and Silence in College Classrooms ...........................................264
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For the past 28 years, the pedagogical site of the postsecondary coeducational classroom has come under severe scrutiny. Following Hall and Sandler’s (1982) groundbreaking report that examined the coeducational experience of female college students, a series of investigations assessing gender equity within the coeducational college/university classrooms emerged (Allan & Madden, 2003; Brady & Eiser, 1995; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Constantinople, Cornelius, & Gray, 1988; Cornelius, Gray, & Constantinople, 1990; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin, 2003; Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984; Krupnick, 1985; Powdrill, Just, Garcia, & Amador, 1997; Prentice, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Salter, 2003; Salter & Persaud, 2003; Tannen, 1991; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Scholars who assessed the coeducational classroom experiences of female students identified a series of factors influencing their progress as learners (Allan & Madden, 2003; Auster & MacRone, 1994; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Constantinople et al., 1988; Cornelius et al., 1990; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Crombie et al., 2003; Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984; Powdrill et al., 1997; Prentice, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Salter, 2003; Salter & Persaud, 2003; Whitt et al., 1999). The lack of female faculty representation, overt and covert sexist behavior by faculty, administrators, and students, teacher-student interaction and stereotypical comments about women have repeatedly been cited as placing women at a distinct educational disadvantaged in the classroom (Allan & Madden, 2003; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Crombie et al., 2003; Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984; Salter, 2003, Salter & Persaud, 2003; Whitt et al., 1999). Sadker and Sadker (1994) further cited significant
gender inequities within American college classrooms. They point out that college women were twice as likely to be silent during class discussions than college men, who often monopolize class interaction. "Women's silence is the loudest at college," argued the Sadkers, "with twice as many females voiceless" (p. 170). Seeking to understand the influence of gender on classroom interaction, Krupnick (1985) also found that articulate and intellectually capable female students were silenced by male students who interrupted more, talked more, and talked longer than their female counterparts.

Although examining the role of gender within the dynamic coeducational classroom has been a potential source of insight into understanding the learning styles and academic experiences of female college students, a number of educational scholars continued to disagree on whether a chilly climate exists for women within coeducational settings (Allen & Madden, 2003; Brady & Eiser, 1995; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Powdrill et al., 1997; Prentice, 2000). A recent longitudinal empirical study, conducted by the American Council on Education, further illustrated that women verbally participated more than men in coeducational college classrooms (King, 2004).

Despite the aforementioned conflicting perspectives as to the nature and extent of gender bias in coeducational college classrooms, “perceptions and experiences of students within the social organization of the classroom play a crucial role in shaping their participation in class” (Weaver & Qi, 2005, p. 571). Positive associations between academic achievement and classroom-related communication skills such as public speaking, analytic listening, and questioning have been found to benefit student learning (Rubin & Graham, 1988). As such, if women perceive and experience college and university classrooms as hostile learning environments, their classroom participation can
potentially be affected. Burleson and Samter (1992) agreed that a clear link between oral communication behaviors in the classroom and academic performance undoubtedly exist. What is not clear and requires further investigation is how women understand and experience their voice and silence in the collegiate classrooms, particularly within single-sex collegiate classrooms. Much of the research that examines the dynamics of college/university classrooms, as related to students’ verbal participation, has been conducted in coeducational classroom environments (Luke, 1994; Sadker & Saker, 1994; Salter & Persuad, 1994). A need to interrogate verbal participation within the pedagogical site of women’s college classrooms is warranted.

Within the educational and pedagogical site of the American university and college classroom, questions of voice and silence have been of particular theoretical and practical concern for educators. Speech, verbal participation, verbal expression, and debate have come to occupy vitally important places in American educational systems (Bruner, 1996; Kim & Markus, 2002).

Following the Freireian (1970) model of critical pedagogy as conscientização (conscientisation), a discernible shift from a focus on lecturing and depositing information to an emphasis on active and collaborative learning has led to a re-conceptualization of knowledge transmission and classroom participation within American colleges and universities. This shift has caused a number of faculty members to incorporate active learning strategies within their pedagogy (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). As such, an emphasis on verbal participation, speech, and voice have become essential components of student learning.
American educators who embrace active learning pedagogies believe students gain more from the classroom experience because verbal participation is a central factor of student engagement, student learning, and empowerment (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Much of the research on education also suggests that students who actively engage and participate within classrooms learn more (Hamlin & Janssen 1987; Howard, 1996; Tinto, 1997). One may speculate that an underlying assumption for educators within the academy is that verbal participation—talking, speech, and voice—is important because it promotes and stimulates critical thinking skills for students. The degree to which some American instructors value speech is so pervasive that they urge their students to participate more, to talk more, and to contribute more in the classroom (Kim & Markus, 2005). As such, instructors value talking because it is often synonymous with being an independent thinker within college and university settings, (Kim & Markus, 2005), which is a philosophy that derived from the epistemological foundations of Western knowledge (knowledge derived from Eurocentric perspectives/experiences). However, not everyone speaks/verbally communicates their thoughts as American/Western cultural values assume; socioeconomic, ethno-racial, and regional variations exist that could potentially impact the level of verbal participation/expression within the classroom. According to Kim and Markus (2005) the dominant belief that Asian and Asian American students do not talk as much as they should, do not think in the way that they should and do not act as they should, is a reality that non-white students experience within predominantly white classrooms. As such, silence becomes a vehicle by which Asian/Asian American students reject behavioral assimilation (Kim & Markus, 2005). However, if one considered the social categories of
race and gender in relation to verbal participation and classroom dynamics, some feminists and educational scholars also suggest that women of color employ voice and silence as strategies of survival within the academy (Anzaldúa, 1990; Asher, 2001; Blue, 2001; Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Gilmore, 1997; hooks, 1989; Hurtado 1996; Lorde, 1984; Luke, 1994).

Unlike some White women, a number of women of color deliberately adopt silence as a method of knowledge acquisition and/or resistance within classrooms (Hurtado, 1996). Other conceptual pieces suggest that women of color employ silence as a tactical strategy to learn about those in dominant positions of power (Rollins, 1985, Romero, 1992). Although verbal participation, speaking, or being outspoken within a classroom also has the potential to function as a process of knowledge acquisition and learning for women of color, Hurtado (1996) argues that women of color must constantly be aware of what they say and how they speak within classroom settings because of the visible markers of race and gender. As such, scholars examining the academic experiences of women of color suggested that educational environments and classroom dynamics impact women of color differently than White women (Anzaldúa, 1990; Blue, 2001; Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Gilmore, 1997; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Luke, 1994).

Significance of the Study

A number of conceptual pieces (Anderson, 2002; Cardoza, 1991; Gloria, Hamilton, Robinson-Krupius, & Willson, 1999; Gonzalez et al. 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; King, 2004; Walker et al., 2001) indicate that Black women and Latinas continue
to lag behind White and Asian American women in academic enrollment and degree attainment. At the same time, Black women and Latinas are getting into college at a faster rate than their male counterparts, but relatively few empirical investigations concerning how Black women and Latinas experience the collegiate classroom have been conducted.

Factors contributing to the under representation of Black women and Latinas in the traditional college age population have been attributed to racial and gender stereotypes, institutional climate, admissions criteria, socioeconomic issues, and financial need (Allen, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000, Flannery, 1983; hooks, 1989; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Vasquez, 1997). However, relatively little is known from their own words, how they experience the predominantly white collegiate classrooms as learners. Because voice and the expression of voice is linked to effective learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hayes, 2000; Hurtado, 1996) this research employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine how Black women and Latinas understand their use of voice and silence as learners in a women’s college classroom. Moreover, this study sought to examine if the intersecting social categories of race, class and gender are pervasive elements influencing their reasons for engaging in verbal participation and/or silence within collegiate classroom.

Because this study has a theoretical and a practical focus, to truly capture and understand the intricate experiences of Black women and Latinas, I utilized Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic habitus and Black and Latina feminisms’ epistemology of oppositional/multiple consciousness, as a theoretical framework. Considering that Black women and Latinas are not a monolithic group, their ability to speak or not to speak is
greatly influenced by various social contexts and internal processes. As a result, employing a blended theoretical framework will strengthen one’s understanding of the multiple factors influencing the educational experiences of these women. Furthermore, this study was not an attempt to essentialize, minimize, or disregard the experiences of different ethno-racial groups. Rather, it was an effort to understand the intricacies of how diverse Black women and Latinas understand and interpret their voice and use of silence within collegiate classroom settings of a women’s college. Thus, the following research will provide: working definitions of terms, a critical appraisal of the existing literature examining the effects of women’s colleges on the academic performance of women, an examination of the verbal participation/verbal expression of students within college/university classrooms, and the phenomenon of voice and silence for women and women of color, followed by a conceptualization of the research design consisting of research questions, methodology, data collection, data analysis, findings, discussion, caveats and conclusions.

Purpose of the Study

It is my intention that this study serve several purposes. The first is to acquire relevant information that helps us understand how Black women and Latinas make sense of their collegiate classroom experiences within a women’s college. There are a growing number of journal articles and research reports that offer new perspectives on women as learners. Some studies (Hurtado, 1996; Luke, 1994) have examined women’s ethno-racial background in relation to their learning, but the failure of higher education research and scholarship to explore the many ways gender, race, and class are interdependent and
dynamic elements of identity that significantly impacts the development of consciousness/self-definition of women of color (Alemán, 2003) is grounds for this investigation.

The second purpose is to examine how the dynamic collegiate classroom environment of a women’s college can serve to hinder and or encourage voice and silence among Black women and Latinas as student learners. Thirdly, this study seeks to place the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas at the center of analysis. Because Black women and Latinas have been racialized and sexualized in similar ways within U.S. society, identifying the differences and similarities of their academic experiences can shed light and perhaps help educators understand why Black women and Latinas continue to fall behind White and Asian/Asian American women in academic enrollment and degree attainment. Lastly, with respect to faculty development, faculty members need to become aware of distinct oral communication behaviors/patterns employed by Black women and Latinas within collegiate classrooms. Professors need to realize that voice and silence of Black women and Latinas is multifaceted, complex and interconnected to race, class and gender. Thus, this study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the phenomenon of voice and silence, as experienced by Black women and Latinas in a women’s college. The following research questions guided this study:

- How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom?
- What meanings do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence?
What do Black women and Latinas’ perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence?

Assumptions

This study builds from a critical post-modernist framework that draws on notions that recognize and understand how individuals are simultaneously oppressed and privileged and how this experience continually changes according to the contexts in which they find themselves. Rather than focus on the effects of one or two forms of oppression, a feminist perspective also emphasized an understanding of the intersections of multiple systems of oppression and privilege that affect and shape all women’s lives. There is also emphasis on individual resistance and agency in light of individual and systemic forms of oppression. Grounded in a critical post-modernist and Black and Latina feminist framework of deconstructing and emphasizing difference, several key assumptions underlie this study.

- The politics of voice and silence for women must be understood and valued as an important function of how they make sense of their academic/collegiate learning.
- The academic experiences of Black women and Latinas must be understood within a broader social context that should encompass the social determinants of race and gender role norms.
- The diversity of women’s experiences should be recognized as much as the similarities.
Studies need to overcome the limitations of documenting the learning experiences of Black women, Latinas and other Women of color like Asian/South Asian American and Native American Women.

In light of these key assumptions, studying Black women and Latinas in the perspective of their own experiences will generate recommendations on future research and practices that will enhance the experiences of these students in academic settings.

**Definition of Terms**

Throughout the course of this dissertation, the terms voice, silence, politics of voice and silence, Black women and Latinas will be used extensively. Because the meanings of these terms vary significantly by field of study and/or discipline, the following definitions are provided to maintain consistency throughout this proposed study.

- **Voice**: The ability to speak, to verbally communicate; talk.
- **Silence**: The relative lack or total lack of speech/linguistic utterance.
- **Politics of Voice and Silence**: the process by which an individual negotiates and determines when to speak or when to be silent or engage in silence.
- **Black women**: Encompasses all women of African descent/heritage from the African Diaspora.
- **Latina**: refers to a non-Anglo American woman living in the United States from Latin America or the Spanish speaking Caribbean.
- **Women of color**: is a political term African American, Latinas, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian women and women of other ethno-racial groups.
employ to describe a shared global experience and common struggle against marginality and oppression.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As a product of the historical and political context of the 1960s and 1970s, a number of progressive social programs emerging from the Civil Rights Movement that drastically altered the composition of American higher education. Following the implementation of programs like Affirmative Action in 1965 and Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, which prohibited discrimination based on sex in educational settings, Black women and Latinas made significant gains in higher education (as professors, administrators, college presidents, trustee members, etc.) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) signaling their real inclusion into academic institutional life. While the enrollment of Black female students and Latinas has steadily increased in the last decade, they continue to remain disproportionately underrepresented at four-year institutions (King, 2004). Furthermore, they continue to lag behind White and Asian American students in baccalaureate degree completion and educational attainment (Anderson, 2002; Cardoza, 1991; Gloria et al., 1999; Gonzalez et al., 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; Vasquez, 1997).

According to The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac 2000-2004 (2005 Chronicle of Higher Education 2007-8 Almanac, 54(1). (Aug, 2007). p 20 Chronicle of Higher Education 2007-8 Almanac, 54(1). (Aug, 2007). p 20), a 22% increase was experienced by Latinas entering college versus a 9.5% increase among White women for the same time. But while Latinas are getting into college at a faster rate than their male counterparts, they were not necessarily earning a bachelor’s degree (O’Keefe, 2006). “Their drop-out numbers are significant because many are working parents or single
parents” (p. 4). Black women, in comparison to Black men, have also experienced an increase in college enrollment, but two educational barriers for Black women were time and money (O’Keefe, 2006). Many Black women, like many Latinas, accrued debt from their loans and other educational expenses (O’Keefe, 2006). They often have multiple jobs that impacted their studies and ability to participate in on-campus activities (O’Keefe, 2006).

Addressing this gap in educational attainment should be a critical priority of many policymakers, researchers, administrators, faculty members, and practitioners who need to become aware of and understand the potential factors affecting the academic experiences, retention, and graduation rates of diverse populations of students. In an attempt to better understand the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas in collegiate classrooms, this review of the literature has been limited to examining voice and silence within educational settings, employing a taxonomy devised by sociolinguist Saville-Troike (1985).

To explain how silence, which is dependent upon a temporal and spatial context for its interpretation, is more context embedded than speech, Saville-Troike (1985) devised an ethnography of communication. For Saville-Troike, communication patterns occur along the following dimensions: societal organizations, community attitudes (which are macro functions of social control), ritual interactions with the supernatural, groups (re) enforcing identity, and individual levels. He further classifies the aforementioned dimensions into three categories: institutional, group and individually determined forms of communication.
Institutional determined communication patterns derive from organizations that create rules as to when individuals can and should speak or remain silent (i.e. churches, temples, libraries, classrooms, etc.) (Saville-Troike, 1985). Group determined patterns of speech include speech and silence that was determined by group decisions, which was usually situational (i.e., legislative bodies), normative (shunning as punishment, children, or audience members), and/or symbolic. Individually determined is the most complex manifestation of silence and or speech because it resulted from a number of socio-contextual, linguistic, and psychological situations. Although these taxonomies were not meant to be exhaustive, they illustrate that silence is a component of various communication styles and situations. For Saville-Troike, communication patterns, especially silence, are shaped by language, social institutions, and society as a whole. Taking these factors into consideration, I employ Saville-Troike’s taxonomies as a framework to organize the relevant literature for this study.

The body of evidence reviewed in this literature begins with an overview of the effects of women’s colleges on women’s academic performance, followed by a review of how institutionalized classroom culture of college/university environments impacts levels of student engagement and participation. Because college/university classrooms are perceived to be prime spaces for verbal participation where cross-cultural communication skills and dialogue around difference (Boler, 2004) occur, the literature on collegiate classrooms and racial/cultural difference must be examined as well.

Following the overview of the literature under institutional determined voice and silence within classrooms, I restrict the review to examining voice and silence for women as a group, (entitled group determined voice and silence) within college/university
settings. A number of scholars (Canada & Pringle, 1995; Crombie et al., 2003; Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984; Powdrill et al., 1997; Prentice, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Salter, 2003; Salter & Persaud, 2003; Whitt et al., 1999) continued to suggest that women are at an educational disadvantage in coeducational college/university environments for its androcentric nature and method of knowledge dissemination. As such, how women, as a group, experience voice and silence within postsecondary classroom environments needs to be assessed to determine if any complex issues continue to emerge in these spaces.

Examining the literature on voice and silence pertaining to women of color was also invaluable to this study. Missing from a number of the studies on coeducational institutions and women's colleges was the differential experiences of women of color (Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995). The small number of women of color being studied, who attended coeducational and women’s colleges, coupled with survey techniques that do not over sample students from different racial and ethnic groups were some of the cited reasons for the lack of data on these populations (Smith et al., 1995). The few studies that examined gender and ethnicity cited the importance of including women of color in analyses. Thus, the literature pertaining to women of color was necessary as it sought to address how the reality of racism and sexism impacted their academic experience. Furthermore, examining the literature on women of color can help us understand how the intersections of race, class and gender have the ability to shape individual linguistic utterances, communication patterns within classrooms. Lastly, the literature on individually determined voice and silence provides an overview on factors impacting an individual’s decision to engage their voice or remain silent within educational settings.
Women’s Colleges and Women’s Academic Performance

Following the decline of women’s colleges from 267 in 1950s, to 238 in the 1970s to 84 in 1992 (Smith et al., 1995; Tidball, 1999), a number of studies assessed the collegiate environment and academic value of women’s colleges on women’s academic achievement (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Miller-Bernal, 1993; Minsum 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Smith, 1990; Smith et al., 1995; Tidball, 1999). As more institutions became coeducational, the research suggested women's experiences at coeducational institutions was not always equal to the experiences of their male counterparts (Smith et al, 1995). “Women were often treated as ‘outside the norm’ and as ‘second-class citizens’ on co-educational college and university campuses” (Smith et al., 1995). At the same time, there was a significant body of literature demonstrating that women's colleges have a direct, positive impact on their students (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Miller-Bernal, 1993; Minsum, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Smith, 1990; Smith et al., 1995).

Since their inception in the 19th century, the question of whether women’s colleges are better suited for women’s academic achievement continued to be at the heart of the single sex and coeducational debate. Compared to coeducational institutions, students at women's colleges tended to be more satisfied with their overall college experience, more likely to major in nontraditional fields and express higher levels of self-esteem and leadership skills (Smith et al., 1995). According to Smith et al., women's colleges also provided a uniquely supportive climate for women to explore themselves in
a wide range of intellectual and social leadership roles. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) further concluded that the "research evidence of the last 20 years provides a modestly strong educational argument for their (women's colleges) preservation and public support” (p. 639). Although the aforementioned researchers were wary to suggest that women’s colleges are better than coeducational institutions, women’s colleges still contribute to the disproportionate success of their female students (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Miller-Bernal, 1993; Minsum 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Smith, 1990; Smith et al., 1995). Despite that women’s colleges currently educate fewer than 3% of all women attending postsecondary institutions (http://www.womenscolleges.org/perspective/nsse-study), Tidball’s (1973, 1980, 1999) studies and Miller-Bernal (1993) continuously found that “women who graduated from women's colleges are about two times more likely than women who have graduated from coeducational colleges to receive their doctorates, enter medical school or become recognized leaders in their fields” (Miller-Bernal, 1993, p. 24). "Greater academic attainment, including higher test scores and greater propensity to enroll in further education, has generally been found to characterize students in single sex educational institutions compared to those in coeducational institutions” (Miller-Bernal, 1993, p. 25). African American women at women’s colleges were also significantly more satisfied with their social life than were African American women at coeducational institutions (Smith et al., 1995).

Taking these factors into consideration, one rationale for conducting this study in a women’s college was to control for the presence of male students in the classroom. As studies (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Salter & Persuad, 1994) have shown, men tend to
dominate classroom conversation and at times alienate female classmates. A second rationale was based on the National Survey on Student Engagement that suggests that women attending women’s colleges report higher levels of engagement. Finally, women attending women’s colleges were more likely to be involved in both academic and extracurricular aspects of their campus community that contributed to their success (Smith et al. 1995). Because women at single-sex institutions were more engaged in effective educational practices and reported higher levels of feelings of support and greater gains in college, examining if Black women and Latinas simultaneously experienced a higher level of engagement and participation within a predominantly white women's colleges was significant in this study.

Institutional Determined Voice and Silence: Collegiate Classrooms

As part of the larger social system, colleges and universities have an institutionalized classroom culture where rules on how to behave, when to speak and when not to speak are imposed on students (Howard, 2002; Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Although communication styles and instructional strategies may differ from instructor to instructor, according to Howard et al. (1996), both students and instructors are socialized in a “banking model of education” where instructors are viewed as possessing all the knowledge and students are bodies who need to be filled and deposited with information (Freire, 1970). In this traditional educational method of knowledge acquisition, little dialogue and cross-cultural exchange occur between instructor and student. The role of the instructor is to bring the knowledge to the students as they passively absorb the information, gained largely through note taking and
memorization (Freire, 1970; Howard et al., 1996). For Weaver and Qi, (2005) this hierarchical nature of disseminating knowledge and distinct divisions between professors and students that exist in college/university classrooms potentially constrained student’s verbal participation.

In their quantitative study, Weaver and Qi (2005) suggest that “college classrooms, like any other workplace is a social organization where power is asserted, tasks are negotiated and work is accomplished through the interplay of formal and informal structures” (p. 579). Viewing the classroom as a social organization that has its own formal and informal structure, Weaver and Qi suggest that these classroom structures directly affect students’ class participation.

Providing an overview of the literature examining formal and informal structures, student attributes and classroom participation, Weaver and Qi (2005) illustrate that authority relations (based on faculty as the authority of knowledge), student’s fear of instructor’s criticism, and class size are three elements of the formal classroom structure that have been cited as directly and indirectly constraining class participation for students. Fear of peer disapproval and influences of student attributes (age, gender, academic preparation, confidence) were two additional factors that make up the informal structure of the classroom that impact student participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005).

To determine to what extent formal structures (class size, faculty as the authority of knowledge, faculty-student interaction, and fear of professor’s criticisms) and/or informal structures (fear of peer disapproval, excessive student participation and student attributes) of the classroom influenced student participation, Weaver and Qi (2005) conducted a survey measuring a number of variables assessing student’s perception on a
wide range of issues pertaining to their experiences with teaching and learning. Results from this study indicated that formal and informal structures of the classroom impact student participation. Among the 10 causal variables studied, faculty and student interaction seem to have the largest direct, indirect and total effects on participation as reported by students (Weaver & Qi, 2005). In the formal structure, faculty not only indirectly shaped classroom dynamics “but also directly influence students’ behaviors in class through the relationship they develop with their students” (p. 591).

Faculty-student interaction both inside and outside of the classroom have been found to encourage student development (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1997). Howard (2002), Howard et al., (1996), and Weaver and Qi (2005) all agreed that instructors must redefine the classroom situation in order to help students transform themselves from a largely passive audience to active participants in their own learning processes. Providing a number of approaches by which faculty members can distance themselves from authoritative classroom behaviors and lessen students’ fear of faculty criticism, Weaver and Qi recommend that faculty memorize students’ names, request that students refer to them by their first name, arrange desks in circles, and create an atmosphere of openness, respect, and equality. As for examining the informal structures, the evidence suggest that students report fear of peer disapproval as affecting participation both directly and indirectly (Weaver & Qi, 2005). “Conformity to group norms and thus fear of disapproval had a large negative affect on self-reported participation” (p. 591). Para-participation, “other forms of participation that occur alongside the more conventional type to suggest student’s involvement with class” (p. 577) was also found to increase the likelihood of verbal participation within the classroom (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Within this
study gender, student preparation and class size had little or no effect on self-reported participation rates for students in college/university classrooms.

Understanding the complex nature of faculty-student interaction and student-student interactions is central to fostering class participation among students and cultivating change within postsecondary classrooms (Weaver & Qi, 2005). However, a huge constraint according to this study was the institutionalized culture of college and university classrooms that continued to encourage and perpetuate this view of faculty as expert and authority figure. The powerful influence of educational traditions continue to shape pedagogical practices, student learning, engagement, and participation in American classrooms.

With regards to classroom norms and student participation, the “consolidation of responsibility” is also cited as the traditional mode of delivery in a number of college/university classrooms (Howard et al., 1996; Karp & Yoels, 1976). According to the consolidation of responsibility, regardless of class size, only a handful of students dominate and/or account for the majority of interaction/conversation within the classroom (Howard et al., 1996; Karp & Yoels, 1976). This pattern of student interaction continues to operate within college/university classrooms, raising major concerns for the future of student learning. For Howard (2002) “faculty members ought to be concerned with the percentage of students participating in their courses, because there is substantial evidence to suggest that students learn more when they are actively engaged with the material, their instructor and their classmates” (p. 764). Although previous studies of participation in traditional classroom discussions have focused on issues of student gender (Canada & Pringle, 2004; Constantinople et al., 1988; Crawford & Macleod, 1990; Crombie et al.,
Howard’s (2002) multi-method approach was a unique study that examined whether instructional mode of delivery and classroom structure impacted levels and quality of student participation and student learning.

Conducting a comparison of the nature of student interaction and participation in interactive tele-courses (distance education courses) versus traditional delivery college courses, Howard’s (2002) exploratory study provided insightful evidence, while simultaneously supporting existing data on college student participation. In this study, a non-authoritative mode of instruction increased student interaction and participation in the traditional delivery college classroom. To create conducive spaces for interaction and participation,

Instructors adopted several strategies to control talkers and to encourage greater participation by quiet students. In general instructors sought to create a relaxed and engaging classroom environment by being enthusiastic themselves, by offering opportunities for students to get to know one another and become comfortable with one another in small settings, by being non-judgmental on issues of opinion etc. (p. 772)

Although students and instructors within the traditional delivery classroom worried about the consolidation of responsibility, instructors sought ways to encourage greater participation from the silent majority within the classroom (Howard, 2002). The use of active and collaborative learning techniques was vital for student learning in this study. Thus, this study supported the belief that Freire’s (1970) banking system of education is not conducive in promoting student participation and student interaction. Active and collaborative learning techniques appeared to be the most suitable in promoting deeper learning within traditional classrooms.
Unlike the traditional delivery classrooms, student interaction within the tele-courses was common, but student participation occurred less within these educational spaces. Due to the structural nature of tele-courses, the nature of student interaction, participation, and student learning within these environments has come into question. Howard’s (2002) study acknowledges that “technology formed a barrier that students were hesitant to cross” (p. 776). As a result, students rarely interacted verbally with their instructor and/or students at the other site (Howard, 2002). Instead, they preferred to rely on the classmates that were physically present within the room for guidance and support. Further illustrating that classroom structures and instructional mode do impact students’ ability to verbally participate/speak.

Summary

In the aforementioned studies (Howard, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005), instructional mode, faculty-student interaction, student-student interaction, and classroom structure (traditional classroom vs. tele-courses) were four factors impacting students’ ability to actively engage and participate within college/university settings. The hierarchical structure of faculty-student interaction and faculty instructional mode of delivery stemming from the powerful influence of institutionalized educational traditions shaped student’s ability to verbally participate in college/university settings. The ability of faculty members to challenge the traditional lecture method of teaching and engage strategies/activities of active learning also increases student’s verbal participation. Despite the fact that college/university classrooms are perceived to be prime spaces for verbal participation, development of cross-cultural communications skills and dialogue
around difference (Boler, 2004), Howard (2002) and Weaver and Qi’s (2005) studies also suggest that the configuration of academic classrooms (course content, class size, instructor’s pedagogy, instructional mode) play a significant role in determining the levels of participation of college students.

With regards to the ongoing debate over the role of a student’s gender on levels of participation, the evidence indicates conflicting perspectives as to the nature and extent of a student’s gender hindering or promoting verbal participation in college/university classrooms (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Boersma, Gay, Jones, Morrison, & Renee, 1981; Constantinople et al., 1988; Cornelius et al. 1990; Crawford & Macleod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984; Heller, Puff & Mills, 1985). Inconsistent findings and methodological flaws existing in the literature suggest that more empirical research is necessary. However, one common element the aforementioned studies share is that examining social contextual features (class size, class composition in terms of gender balance, discipline, gender of instructor, specific instructors that encourage/discourage participation, classroom diversity) of college/university classrooms are intricately connected to college student’s verbal participation.

Classroom participation, as cited by Sadker and Sadker (1994), is considered by both female and males students to be one of the factors related to effective learning and positive learning experiences. However, as a construct of the formal Western educational system, college/university classrooms can also exhibit forms of gender and racial bias existing in the larger socio structural environment. Although parents and students usually perceive education to be unbiased, neutral, and even altruistic and egalitarian in nature, educational classroom environments can serve the dual function of empowering
historically marginalized groups/individuals, while simultaneously silencing them.

Because silence is embedded in language, social institutions, and society as a whole, silence and voice should not be understood as a bifurcated concept but more of a complex continuum (Clair, 1998; Jaworski, 1993; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). Nowhere was this more visible than in the American university/college classroom.

Thus far, institutional practices and structural features of the classroom have been identified as two factors that hinder and or promote college students verbal participation (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Boersma et al., 1981; Constantinople et al., 1988; Cornelius et al., 1990; Crawford & Macleod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Hall & Sandler, 1982; 1984, Heller, Puff & Mills, 1985; Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 1996; Weaver & Qi, 2005).

The following theoretical pieces examine how institutionalized racial and social inequities, existing within the larger society, impacted the internal dynamics of college/university classrooms, ultimately affecting instructional strategies, student interaction and participation.

Institutional Determined Voice and Silence: Undoing Racial and Social Inequities

Seeking to create educational spaces that value diversity and social equity, so as not to replicate the social inequities of the larger society, Boler (2004) examined the extent to which the First Amendment protects hostile bigoted speech within university classrooms. Building from Butler’s (1997) assertion, “All speech is not free. Power inequities institutionalized through economies, gender roles, social class, and corporate-owned media ensure that all voices do not carry the same weight” (p. 3), Boler’s
conceptual piece spoke of the improbability of freedom of speech for certain groups within a U.S. democracy. As such, Boler proposed an affirmative action pedagogy:

A pedagogy that ensures critical analysis within higher education classrooms of any expressions of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, ableism, and classism...[it] seeks to ensure that we bear witness to marginalized voices in our classrooms, even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices. (p. 4)

Considering that all voices are not equally valued and protected under the First Amendment, Boler suggests employing an affirmative action pedagogy to create classroom spaces to empower historically marginalized and silenced groups (i.e., economically disadvantaged students, students of color, gay, bisexual, transgender, transgender students). These classroom environments will serve to equip and empower historically marginalized groups with the necessary skills to defend their rights and perspectives within any social space. A fundamental component to Boler’s affirmative action pedagogy is a theoretical and practical commitment by faculty members to privilege the voices of certain students, while purposefully silencing others within the classroom. The question that is raised is whether an affirmative action pedagogy affects change within educational structures built on a legacy of social and racial inequities?

The act of silencing dominant voices by granting marginalized voices the space to talk, does not address the systemic inequalities existing within the United States. Although Boler’s (2004) pedagogical challenge attempts to address the legacies of social, political and economic injustice of particular groups, the act of silencing students who are members of the dominant group while privileging marginalized voices has the potential of being labeled an act of reverse discrimination. Furthermore, the fact that many students of color struggle with negotiating what it means to be a person of color (in the midst of racist stereotypes and colorblindness within institutions of higher education)
may also lead students of color to intentionally remain silent within classrooms. Affirmative action pedagogy also functions to perpetuate a Western binary model of knowledge acquisition and understanding, where talking/voice is understood as good and silence is seen as marginalization/oppression. Taking these factors into account, Boler’s affirmative action pedagogy is a temporary answer to a larger systemic issue.

For marginalized voices to be truly heard and understood, structural change that considers how culture, ideology, behavior, and social institutions have been manipulated, shaped, and influenced by the dominant class (to promote their interest, while undermining and marginalizing the ideas of underrepresented de-privileged constituencies) is required. DeCastell (2004) who explicitly challenged Boler’s (2004) argument for its unrealistic objective of selectively silencing some students while privileging others suggests that voice cannot be granted; voice must be “taken up”, possessed or captured within educational settings.

Speech must be taken by employing ones agency to do so (de Certeau, 1997). More importantly, talking just for the sake of talking and hearing marginalized voices will not fix social injustices, even within the microcosm of the classrooms (DeCastell, 2004). Instead of reducing people’s voices to their social identity, as Boler’s (2004) affirmative action pedagogy implicitly suggests, DeCastell (2004) advocates addressing ignorance through classroom dialogue.

Whereas Boler (2004) argues that classrooms were the few unique spaces where individuals from diverse social, economic, and sexual backgrounds can come together, discuss and share different perspectives, DeCastell (2004) is unconvinced of classroom environment functioning as safe spaces for dialogue around difference. One may
speculate that the underlying reason behind this skepticism stems from the dual function of the college/university classroom. Although college/university classrooms have the ability to function as a safe space for dialogue, they also have the potential to silence. Silence within the classroom can result from a reaction/response to physical, verbal/intellectual diversity, or the perception of someone’s otherness, which depends on ones stereotypes and prejudices (DeCastell, 2004). In light of this dichotomy, it is imperative that faculty be equipped with the necessary skills to facilitate the intense dialogues that both DeCastell (2004) and Jones (2004) proposed. Unlike DeCastell who argues that dialogue is a method of deconstructing the ignorance that perpetuates oppressive and defamatory speech among students, Jones examined the value of voice and dialogue within the classroom to provide an alternative approach to understanding democratic dialogue. Providing an explicit rationale of why progressive educators value voice/communication within educational settings, Jones simultaneously interrogates the significance of having dialogue around difference within classrooms. In doing so, Jones cautions educators of “privileging voice over silence” (p. 65) in their pursuit of creating democratic classrooms.

The ability of students to freely communicate and voice their perspectives is an essential component of democratic classrooms and student learning (Jones, 2004). “In democratic classrooms, transparency, communication and accessibility are the basic educational skills. Uncomfortable silence, negative comments, prejudice, and lack of interest in the other…are to be challenged” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 129). Silence is perceived as disturbing to progressive educators (Jones, 2004). It signals not only lack
of dialogue, but oppression and marginalization (Jones, 2004). Dialogue, becomes what Jones labels the “talking cure.”

The matter at hand for Jones (2004) is the emphasis and pressure placed on students, by progressive educators, to talk through issues. It is assumes that,

Dialogue provides the opportunity for the development of tolerance, understanding and ultimately unity; it can decrease instances of ignorance and racism and other prejudices that are the basis of social vision. Not only will dialogue between groups decrease actual threat, but also—insofar as it leads to the dominant group knowing more about the other—it potentially reduces imagined threat by improving social cohesion. (pp. 57-58)

Jones challenges this precise notion, that talking is a cure, that airing out of issues/concerns is a healthy process for students.

The desire to voice and create dialogue across difference can be perceived as a source of strength, as it allows for open communication among students, but it also has the potential to manifest and create a parasitic relationship on the part of dominant groups towards marginalized groups. The ability of marginalized groups to engage in dialogue may verbally challenge the discourse of dominant groups, but not necessarily change their status within society. In which case, dialogue has the potential to ultimately benefit the already privileged members of society (Jones, 2004). Unlearning the existing dominant educational, social, cultural economic paradigms is what is required from dialogue and necessary within a democratic classroom. Jones questions who benefits from dialogue within college/university classrooms.

Jones’s (2004) conceptual piece grapples with the implication of employing dialogue as a vehicle of communication without examining the power dynamics inherent in the process. What was ultimately most significant to dialogue was not the talking by the marginalized, but the hearing by the dominant group. In her view, if you cannot hear
others, than you cannot understand them, if you cannot understand others, then you cannot hear them. A number of social institutions, including the American educational systems, which is based on Western desire for coherence, authorization, and control as a form of educating (Jones 2004) have rendered the voices, experiences, and intellectual contributions of Black women and Latinas invisible and useless (Anzaldúa, 1987; 1990; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; White, 2001). It is important to note that many students, whether women of color and/or people of color, lack the ability to engage in the kinds of dialogue considered so essential in empowerment pedagogies. Because of this, LiLi (2004) and Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) advocate re-thinking and re-examination the value of silence within educational settings.

Encouraging educators to engage silence instead of dismissing it, both LiLi (2004) and Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) provide a pedagogical understanding of silence that dismantles the false dichotomy between speech and silence. As suggested by scholars in the field of communication (Clair, 1998; Jaworski, 1993; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985), silence for LiLi (2004) and Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) is not the opposite of speech, but a continuum of human communication. Illustrating the important, yet ambiguous role of silence within educational settings, LiLi illustrates that silence has been implicitly and explicitly used by educators to achieve particular objectives. For example, educators use silence as a disciplinary act that aim to establish and maintain order, or they use silence to allow room for reflection and learning in educational settings. Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) further suggest that western educators and the current educational system in the west are rooted in “fear of silence” (p.208). Although educators recognize the function of silence in specific situations, many
educators continue to be uncomfortable with silence within classrooms, which results in their “silencing silence” (Li Li, 2004; p. 69).

According to LiLi (2004) silencing silence reaffirms the primacy of speech and perpetuates the dominant group’s speech as the norm, on a macro level. Silencing silence, functions as a method to devalue silence and to privilege speech (LiLi, 2004). To better serve students, both LiLi (2004) and Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) proposed that dominant groups spend more time cultivating in themselves the capacity to listen to silence, instead of attempting to give voice to individuals who may value their own silence.

Critiquing the primacy of speech and advocating a liberating pedagogy based on listening and reclaiming silent voices, LiLi’s (2004) conceptual perspective is revolutionary because it provides nuanced ways of examining and understanding silence in educational settings. Challenging the emphasis placed on students’ need to articulate what they thought and how they felt within the classroom, LiLi privileges silence. Although this work is a significant contribution to alternative learning strategies, the actual implementation of LiLi’s pedagogy of silence within the classroom is questionable.

The pedagogical literature illustrates that active learning and verbal participation continue to be important factors in fostering quality classroom discussions and student engagement within the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1997). Considering the value of verbal participation and linguistic expression within classrooms, whether faculty members will embrace this alternative educational strategy has yet to be seen. Furthermore, voice is not just a method employed
by the dominant group to privilege their status; voice is also utilized as a method of self-empowerment, self-definition, and agency by some individuals. Hence, considering the value that institutions of higher education place on the primacy of voice it is uncertain whether silence will be reexamined and implemented as a pedagogical tool within the academic university classrooms.

Summary

Taken together, the aforementioned conceptual and empirical literature suggested that institutionalized educational practices within college and university classrooms as well as macro (societal) systems of racial and social inequity do impact a student’s ability to engage, interact and verbally participate in classroom settings. The higher education literature (Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 1996; Weaver & Qi, 2005) identifies instructional mode, faculty-student interaction, student-student interaction, and the configuration of academic classrooms (course content, class size, instructor’s pedagogy) as significant factors impacting the levels of participation of college students. Whereas these structural and pedagogical functions of college/university classrooms are important factors to examine, Boler (2004), DeCastelle (2004), Jones (2004), and LiLi (2004) remind us that institutionalized racism, sexism and social inequality are not isolated factors. They continue to impact levels of verbal participation, engagement, and learning for historically marginalized groups. Although the aforementioned scholars recognize the pedagogical value of the classroom as a space for learning, engagement, dialogue, and verbal participation, they also saw how classrooms have the potential to create a silencing effect for historically marginalized students and other students. In light of these studies,
one could argue that college/university classroom settings function as spaces where rules are created and/or imposed on students by hierarchical relationships (between instructors and students) and/or macro social systems of racism, sexism, and other realms of oppression that shape the communicative styles of individuals. Thus, the aforementioned literature supports Saville-Troike’s (1985) analysis of institutionally determined voice and silence that argued that organizations and social institutions shape individual/group communication patterns.

With regards to this research and the complex function of voice and silence for Black women and Latinas in college/university classrooms, the social contextual features of the classroom must be examined as well. As the aforementioned studies illustrate, the classroom context by which the voice and silence of Black women and Latinas takes place must be assessed in order to make sense of the multiple factors contributing to this phenomenon. Examining the voice and silence of Black women and Latinas is not only contingent upon understanding structural/contextual features of the college/university classrooms, but understanding the complex economic background, ethno-racial and gendered identities of marginalized individuals/groups can also shed light on why Black women and Latinas may employ distinct linguistic utterances/communication styles within college/university classrooms.

**Group Determined Voice and Silence: Women and Students of Color**

The reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them…Race and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than
peripheral to the self…they operate through visual markers on the body. (Alcoff, 2006, pp. 5-6)

The visible identities of race and gender are both the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and a means of manifesting unity and resistance (Alcoff, 2006). This dichotomous function of racial and gendered identities further problematize one’s understanding of why individuals or groups employ certain linguistic utterances/communication styles in particular settings.

The literature reviewed under the classification of institutionally determined voice and silence, supports Alcoff’s (2006) assertion that individual/collective subjects are constituted by social systems. The way individuals understand and process information is not necessarily neutral or independent from the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which the processes take place. Cultural beliefs and processes of gender and racial socialization shape individual/group communication patterns (Belenky et al., 1986, Hayes, 2000; Hurtado, 1996; Kim & Markus, 2002, 2005; Luke, 1994). For example, women’s silence is still perceived by many as a representation of passivity, weakness, and reticent (Luke, 1994). However, Alcoff also suggests that individual/collective subjects possess relative autonomy to challenge and subvert those social systems/social institutions that impact their lives and shape their linguistic expressions. In the case of women and students of color, voice and/or silence is not only shaped by socio-structural/contextual features of American college/university classrooms, but it is group determined as well (Luke, 1994; Winkler-Wagner, 2009). Whether their speech and/or silence is normative, symbolic or situational, the following literature suggest that women and ethno-racial groups strategically employ voice and silence within college/university classrooms for distinct purposes.
Providing an explicitly detailed account of the value of talk within American culture, Kim and Markus (2002, 2005) imply that verbal expression, speech, and debate occupy vitally important roles in much of the Western educational systems. The emphasis placed on talking within American educational systems stems from a notion that is powerfully associated with individuality, freedom, equality, democracy, reason, intelligence and honesty (Kim & Markus, 2005). Unlike a number of East Asian cultures that value and attach significance to silence, “in the American contexts, talking becomes interwoven with speaking the truth, with the meanings and practices of freedom, with individual rights, and the expression and personhood of individuals” (p. 184). Contrasting the conceptualization of speech/talk in Western cultures with the value placed on silence and listening within East Asian cultures, Kim and Markus (2002, 2005) show that talk and/or silence is not only shaped by an individual’s ethno-racial identity, but talk and silence varies in any given cultural context.

According to Kim and Markus (2005) cultural beliefs regarding the relationship between talking and thinking reflect the cultural realities of individuals.

Cultural beliefs not only are abstract beliefs but also are a reflection of the cultural realities. How people process information is not free or independent from the social and cultural contexts in which the processes take place and therefore can have quite a divergent behavioral and social consequences. (p. 188)

Because individuals are socialized differently, their distinct cultural patterns of socialization manifest in ways that may impact their ability to interact within social settings, particularly workplace and educational classroom environments. The fundamental concern raised by Kim and Markus is the failure and /or lack of awareness by American educators to understand how the act of talking, as well as silence, are practices saturated with cultural meanings for certain groups. For example, within
educational settings, verbal participation is a widely accepted form of gaining knowledge and an integral aspect of education in American college/university classrooms. However, listening and not hastily talking are highly valued as ways of demonstrating sympathy and trying to understand what others are feeling within certain East Asian cultures (Kim & Markus, 2005). In China, talking is not used as a primary path to self-identity or achieve an individual goal; talking is reserved for the privileged few who are believed to be skillful in talk (Kim & Markus, 2005). Thus, what results in many U.S. schools that contain a diverse student population is a clash in cultural practices (Kim & Markus, 2005).

Focusing on East Asian/East Asian American students within the California educational system, Kim and Markus (2002, 2005) argue that a clash in cultural practices is inevitable within U.S. educational settings. Instead of embracing the cultural practices of East Asian/East Asian American students, American educational systems force them to assimilate and/or epitomize American cultural ideals. As such, the American cultural practice of talking comes to be understood as natural, good, and beneficial, whereas other practices, like silence, are understood as bad or unproductive (Kim & Markus, 2005).

Kim and Markus (2005) encourage educators within academic communities who are concerned with the lack of verbal participation by East Asian and East Asian Americans students to begin to question whether talking in class is really beneficial. Whether East Asians/East Asian Americans should be encouraged to talk or whether they should be allowed the freedom to pursue learning in alternative ways (Kim & Markus, 2005) should be examined further.
In questioning the general value placed on talking within American educational settings, Kim and Markus (2005) did not offer any concrete suggestions for systemic change. Although they agreed “freedom of speech should not be pressure to speak” (p. 196), verbal participation within postsecondary classrooms continues to be a method to evaluate academic engagement and student performance (Kuh et al., 2005). With this said, Kim and Markus must be acknowledged for their ability to compel educators to examine their own educational assumptions and values around talking and silence.

However, the fact that Kim and Markus built their argument around two opposing/binary perspectives is problematic because granting voice or simply respecting the silence of students within educational settings will not solve the issue of students feeling pressure to assimilate. Moreover, Kim and Markus acknowledge that talk and silence are cultural practices that vary by social context, but they failed to illustrate how talk and silence are also embedded in a cultural practice influenced by an androcentric society that privileges male linguistic expressions and thoughts over women’s.

Although talking in the United States is associated with individualism, knowledge, reason, and intelligence, the value given to what is said or not said also depends on who is doing the talking and/or being silent or silenced. Nowhere in their work is there an assessment of whether East Asian/East Asian American male students spoke more frequently than East Asian/East Asian females or whether silence was equally employed by both genders. Having this information would have been beneficial as patriarchal discourses and the representation of women, as other, continues to have real life consequences.
Conducting one of the most comprehensive literature reviews on women’s speech, voice, and silence within the academy, Luke’s (1994) theoretical paper examines the range of sites in which women’s voices are enabled, contested and silenced throughout their schooling. Situating her analysis within the sociology of education and feminist theory, Luke’s (1994) essay provides a theoretical foundation of feminine voice and silence, while analyzing the socio-structural features of schooling and the academy to illustrate how the gendered production of language can help explain why women are disproportionately silent in educational settings.

Reviewing the body of literature on women and education, Luke (1994) shows that the multiple difficulties women encounter throughout their educational careers, first as girls in elementary school and later as women in university settings, has to do with their positioning as “outsiders.” As outsiders, women are considered readers and reproduces of the masculine canon. They are seen as “inadequate in competitive academic environment, where men invariably appear more articulate and able to sustain rationalist argumentation” (p. 213). Because of this, Luke asserts that some feminists still continue to read women’s silence in public contexts as indicative of their subjugated social status.

Within classroom settings, women’s silence is still perceived by some individuals as the classic representational mode of femininity; as women being allegedly more passive, reticent, and non-aggressive (Luke, 1994). As such, feminists engaged in critical pedagogy have suggested “granting spaces,” “clearing a discursive space so that women can speak in relative safety,” (p. 218) in order to provide opportunity for empowerment. Although Luke recognizes the desirable potential of creating safe spaces to prompt
women to speak, she also argues that granting space for women may have the opposite 
effect of silencing women, especially women of color.

In an effort to center women’s experiences and women’s knowledge, granting 
spaces can be empowering for some women and politically disabling and 
counterproductive for others. Because women have different ways of speaking and a 
different relation to language and knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1987; Belenky et al., 1986; 
Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1996), some women have difficulties revealing the 
personal and/or articulating their perspectives in public. Thus, silencing within the 
classroom can emerge as an effect of both the narrative content being discussed as well as 
the subject position of the listeners (Luke, 1994). To emphasize this point, Luke draws 
from her experience of teaching culturally diverse students in Australian universities.

Demonstrating how well intentioned emancipatory pedagogical strategies, like 
granting spaces, can silence women, Luke (1994) also argues that women can and do 
silence each other by engaging in “hierarchal identity politics” (where different identities 
become ranked based on authentically experiencing real embodied oppressions).

In contrast to white middle class women’s accounts of gender inequalities, 
Aboriginal women’s accounts of family separation, indentured servitude, forced 
sterilization and systematic genocide are powerful messages about historical 
silencing and these often rate higher on the oppression scale than white women’s 
estimonials. (p. 220)

As a result, White women (and men) were silenced by their guilt and the narratives of 
people of color due to the complex historical, ideological, and social structures that 

Centering her analysis on encounters with culturally and racially diverse women 
and their use of voice and silence in the classroom, Luke (1994) argues:
To construct pedagogies of emancipation in which women are given access to discourses of power...[it must] proceed from a historizisation of the social, cultural, and economic trajectories along which women pass and which they intersect and embody in various ways. (p. 223)

Instead of privileging individual difference as a method of contesting essentialist notions of women’s experiences, Luke challenged readers to move away from the valorized “I,” that is so pervasive within feminist scholarship, to a renewed commitment to “we” (Luke, 1994). For Luke

The multiple (cultural, racial, sexual, socioeconomic) differences which mark women with social distinction, and which subvert the conceptual and actual possibility of a woman’s collective experience or point of view, very often generate hierarchical identity politics which can be devastating to individual women. (p. 220)

As a result, Luke advocates “recuperating solidarity out of points of affinity” (p. 224) as a means of creating emancipatory practices for women in the classroom.

Luke’s (1994) essay employs an intersectional analysis to illustrate how women’s different voices are the consequences of women’s historical, socio-cultural and economic location in relation to men. She argues that empowerment of voice is not necessarily a politics of liberation or creating “enabling spaces,” for women did not necessarily allow for discourses of power to emerge. For Luke, granting spaces can lead to an emphasis on multiple identities and privileging of individual difference that result in silence for some students within the classroom. Although this situation may occur in academic settings, to suggest that creating safe spaces in classrooms leads women to engage in hierarchal identity politics that eventually silences other students is misleading.

By categorizing women of color’s lived experience as a form of hierarchal identity politics, Luke appears to devalue the political salience of their collective voice because a group of students, in this case White, became silent. Moreover, women of color
in the United States typically are aware of their ethno-racial identities, given their experience of multiple oppressions. As a result, their emphasis on difference (whether racial, sexual, socioeconomic, religious) has been a way to reclaim, reinterpret and reanalyze their histories and their sense of self (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989). To create congruence among the multiple collective voices of women of color and build political alliances within and among students is quite difficult, but possible. However, arguing that difference and particularities of individual experiences can leave women with no apparent basis for either common knowledge about their experiences or unified action is absurd. Although Luke built from the theoretical tradition of Lorde’s (1984) different similarities (respecting differences, while acknowledging similarities), Luke also failed to discuss how androcentric political, economic, and ideological systems functioned to marginalize women differently due to their racial identity. Voicing their distinct experiences becomes central to developing self-definition and self-empowerment for many women of color especially in the U.S. (Alcoff, 2006; Collins, 2000).

Providing a nuanced understanding of voice and silence within women’s academic development and learning, Hayes (2000) distinguished among three different meanings or uses of voice in connection with women’s learning: voice as talk, voice as identity, and voice as power. Voice as talk referred to how women use spoken language in learning situations (i.e., verbal participation). As power, voice emphasized women’s development of a consciousness of their collective identity and oppression as women. Used in a metaphorical sense, voice as identity “refers to a process of naming experiences that were previously unarticulated…the act of naming our experiences is an integral part
of establishing who we are…giving voice to our experiences” (p. 92). The gradual evolution of finding a voice, in poetry, art, literature, and dance is a method by which women develop a voice in learning environments. Because women’s identities and self-esteem are influenced by their experiences in various social contexts (Flannery, 2000), “a key assumption in connection with this metaphor [of voice as identity] is that women lose their ‘true’ voices in response to the oppressive nature of social and cultural expectations of women” (Hayes, 2000, p. 95). Thus, silencing occurred when women, especially poor/working class women and women of color seem to experience a disconnect from themselves/identities, their emotions, and their voices in educational settings (Hayes, 2000). Hayes’s conceptual piece is particularly useful for the present study because it situates voice and silence within women’s different socially lived experiences, further illustrating the complexities and implication of voice and silence within women’s learning.

Providing yet another perspective on how women from different cultures use distinct communication styles, Gal (1991) argues that race, ethnicity, and class can have a significant effect on women ability to speak. Conducting an anthropological study of diverse cultures, Gal explores what counts cross-culturally as powerful speech. Showing the differential power of men and women’s linguistic strategies in social institutions, Gal illustrates how linguistic genres in different cultures are forms of resistance to symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1977). In doing so, Gal employed cultural analysis to show how the links between linguistic practices, power and gender are themselves culturally constructed. Examples of silence and muteness as subversive defense and even political protest suggest that linguistic forms, even the most apparently quiescent were strategic
responses to cultural and constitutional contexts (Gal, 1991). Hence, it appears that silence gains different meaning within specific contexts/institutional structures. For example, Western Apache men and women use silence as a strategy of defense against White men in order to baffle and exclude them from cultural practices (Gal, 1991). Thus, silence and inarticulateness were necessarily signs of powerlessness for women. Women’s voice, silence, or communication style could best be understood as strategic responses of resistance to dominate hegemonic cultural forms (Gal, 1991).

Unlike previous studies, Gal’s (1991) macro analysis of various cultures highlight how silence is a temporal and spatial function that is shaped by power, gender, race, and context. Suggesting that verbal interaction is often a site of struggle about gender definition and power (who can speak, when they can speak, and where they can speak), linguistic forms, like silence, are sometimes strategies of action created as a response to institutional and cultural contexts (Gal, 1991).

Summary

When reviewing the body of literature on group determined voice and silence, there are several important considerations to note. Women’s voice and silence cannot be understood outside the social context in which it takes place. These contexts (for example, schooling, the academy, and academic classrooms), as Luke’s (1994) essay suggests, offer complex and sometimes conflicting learning opportunities for women. In addition to this, Luke, Hayes (2000) and Gal’s (1991) conceptual works emphasize how patriarchal structures of society are replicated in many social institutions and contexts, in which women experience oppression and domination. This patriarchal system
amorphously manifests in disciplinary discourses and social institutions (family, schools, and church) that result in the real and symbolic silencing of women. As a result, group determined voice and silence cannot be understood in isolation of institutional social systems and cultural context. Hence, a member of a group’s decision to speak or remain silent is a normative, situational and/or symbolic occurrence (Saville-Troike, 1985). For example, Kim and Markus (2005) do not explicitly state that silence is a normative behavior of East Asian/East Asian American students; instead, they argue that both talk and silence are cultural practices that vary by context and are both saturated in cultural meaning. By illustrating how talk, speech, and verbal participation are valued in Western cultural academic environments, and silence is devalued, but significant within East Asian cultures, Kim and Markus (2005) suggest that the acts of speaking/silence are normative functions of individual/group socialization. Luke’s (1994) and Gal’s (1991) work exemplify how voice and silence for women of color and White students is situational as well as symbolic. When provided with the opportunity to speak/verbally participate in class discussions, Australian women of color/Aboriginies were empowered by sharing their life experiences. Nevertheless, this act of sharing by women of color results in the silencing of White students. With this example, it appears that the actual content/information being discussed or the individual sharing the experience creates a situation where some students are comfortable speaking and others are silenced. This example illustrates how voice and silence within classroom settings is situational, shaped by temporal and spatial locations as well as contextual (influenced by the subject matter of the discussion). At the same time, the act of speaking can also be read as a symbolic representation of empowerment for women of color in the Australian university.
classroom, whereas the silence, exhibited by White students in Luke’s (1994) study, could have also been perceived as a symbolic manifestation of White guilt, fear, ignorance, and the like.

Lastly, in the aforementioned conceptual pieces (Gal, 1991; Hayes, 2000; Kim & Markus, 2002, 2005; Luke, 1994), the scholars built from women’s personal narrative experiences to construct characteristics of women’s voice and silence. In so doing, Gal, Hayes and Luke do not consider how the academic preparedness (a student academic responsibility) of female students shape the way they use voice and silence in classroom settings. Moreover, the literature does not speak of the complex choices/decisions individual women make in order to verbally participate in classrooms or remain silent and/or engage in silence.

**Individually Determined Voice and Silence**

To distinguish voice and silence that hinges on a students’ lack of academic preparation versus individual choice (a voice and silence that is intentional) was necessary to determine if the voice and silence that Black women and Latinas employ has meaning. Attempting to understand why an individual remains silent in particular settings tends to be the most complex manifestation of communication (Saville-Troike, 1985). On an individual level, voice and silence results from a number of psychological (self-esteem, fear, shyness, and depression, for example), social contextual (classroom size, instructor student diversity, gender dynamics) and linguistic (equipped with academic discourse, comfortable speaking, English as a second language) factors. In examining the nuances of voice and silence for women, the following section devotes particular
attention to the linguistic strategies and experiences of women of color in the United States. Moreover, some of the literature examines how individual students can experience oral communication apprehension (anxiety interfering with communications efforts) (McCrosky, 1977) in college/university classrooms. Although some of the studies in this section could have been situated in the group determined voice and silence section, the complex manifestation of voice and silence that individual women of color might experience and exhibit in academic classrooms necessitates a section that speaks to the intricate politics of racial and gendered identities and the challenges that potentially may impact their linguistic expressions within academic settings.

Acknowledging the analytical value and importance of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986), Hurtado (1996) emphasizes the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and class in relation to women of color and their learning experiences. Because the academic experiences of women of color have been largely undocumented in the academic literature, Hurtado’s conceptual essay examines how the production of knowledge for women of color is shaped by multiple consciousness/multiple identities. Although Belenky et al. emphasize the importance of women developing their own voice, for women of color, developing a voice is complicated because it requires them to develop multiple voices (Hurtado, 1996).

“A voice” is not based on individual assertion or individual identity it is not even based on an identity solely as a woman. Many women of color struggle to develop a voice that is representative of the complexity of all groups they belong to because unlike many middle class white women, they don’t wish to reject their communities of origins. Their struggle is to make congruent all those “voices” while being true to themselves. (p. 382)

Examining how women of color make sense of their multiple identities, especially during the production of knowledge, Hurtado suggests that they adopt silence and outspokenness
as two strategies of expression and communication during their academic experience.

Deliberately adopting silence to achieve their own goals, some women of color acquire a strategic/tactical use of voice.

Many women of color use silence with a specific goal in mind and return to their own safe communities to share what they have learned...the knowledge obtained by remaining silent is like a reconnaissance flight into enemy territory that allows for individuals and group survival. (p. 382)

The ability to choose to remain silent allows women of color to acquire and process knowledge; it becomes a strategic method of knowledge acquisition within the classroom. Other scholars (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992) suggest that women of color strategically utilize silence to learn about those in dominant positions of power without those individuals ever suspecting they are being studied.

As a source of power, the act of speaking and being outspoken is the complementary strategy of silence utilized by many women of color in academic classrooms (Hurtado, 1996). Just as silence is a powerful weapon when it can be controlled, knowing when to talk and just exactly what to say is especially effective when certain individuals are not expected to talk (Hurtado, 1996). As a result, silence and outspokenness become two strategies by which women of color acquire and display knowledge in the academic settings.

Supporting Hurtado’s claim, but diverging from her conclusion, Fordham’s (1993) insightful study concludes that silence is employed by high achieving African American girls in order to survive within a competitive sexist and racist academic environment. Utilizing data obtained from an ethnographic study conducted at a high school in Washington DC, Fordham asserts that the dominating patriarchal influences of an unequal racist and sexist society forced African American females towards silence or
loudness. African American females who excelled academically and were considered high achievers at Capital High remained voiceless/silent as an act of defiance. Refusing to consume the internalized images of nothingness/invisibility pervasive within the academy (and society at large), African American females adopted intentional/purposeful silence to reject and deflect the negative stereotypes held by school officials and other students (Fordham, 1993). To be taken seriously, these African American females were forced to disassociate with “those loud black girls” (p. 22)

Focusing on Rita, one of the few outspoken, “loud” African American females at Capital, Fordham (1993) argues that outspoken females are doomed because they give into the negative stereotypes about African American girls/women. Epitomizing Black women’s struggle to fuse two divergent lives concurrently, Rita was both unwilling and unable to be silent. Her reluctance to engage in the active participation of her exclusion from the academy (by remaining silent) stripped her of a sense of power (Fordham, 1993), but simultaneously provided her with a source of inner strength. Like Rita, those loud black girls are visible because of their ability to speak, but they are simultaneously rendered invisible because they are viewed by some of their peers and teachers as academically substandard.

The most salient characteristic of the academically successful African American females at Capital High was deliberate/intentional silence. “Developing and using the strategy at the high school level enables high-achieving African American females to deflect the latent and not so latent hostility and anger that might be directed at them, were they to be both highly visible and academically successful” (Fordham, 1993, p. 17). Explicitly and implicitly learning silence from parents, teachers, school officials and male
peers became an obligatory component for academic excellence. Pagano (1990) argues, “The more successful [women] have been as students, scholars, and teachers, the greater has been [their] active participation in [their] own exclusion” (p. 12). Women’s forced emigration towards silence in the academy has been instrumental in maintaining their dependency and invisibility in the academy (Pagano, 1990). Hence, those loud black girls were ostracized by their peers not because they are unable to handle the academic rigor but because they resisted “active participation in [their] own exclusion” (Fordham, 1993, p. 23).

Fordham’s (1993) analysis is central to this study because it not only illustrates that African American females were not a monolithic group, but it addresses the complexity behind their use of voice and silence as they struggle with the contradiction within their lives. Illustrating how African American adolescents employ outspokenness/loudness as a strategy of resistance, while some remained silent as a method of deflecting the negative controlling images that exist, Fordham’s ethnography ultimately addresses how outspokenness and silence are survival mechanisms for some African American girls. On the other hand, some scholars in the field of communication have also found that voice and silence of students can be caused by fear of oral communication.

For several decades, scholars concerned with individual oral communication have focused their attention on the impact of a person’s fear or anxiety about communication on individual behavior (McCroskey, 1977). Research concerned with oral communication has been conducted under a variety of labels, reticence, audience sensitivity, communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977). For the purposes of the present
research, communication apprehension (CA) will be the terminology utilized as it signifies “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 78).

In his work, McCroskey (1977) “consistently observed that some people are more apprehensive orally than are other people and that this apprehension has a negative impact on their communication behavior as well as other important aspects of their lives” (p. 78). When examining the relationship between communication apprehension and academic achievement among college students, a previous study conducted by McCroskey and Anderson (1976) found that high communication apprehensives have lower academic achievement in traditional interaction-oriented classroom settings than low communications apprehensives. Hence, the ability to speak, verbally participate, and voice one’s opinion/perspective within the classroom directly impacts students’ overall course grade and academic experiences (McCroskey & Anderson, 1976).

In college/university classrooms students’ participation is evaluated as part of the course design/syllabus, which directly influences their course grade (McCrosky, 1977). Evaluating a student’s grade via individual participation is problematic because 15-20% of students suffer from debilitating oral communication apprehension, resulting from individual personality traits (emotional maturity, cyclothmia, is a mild mood disorder that is sometimes seen as more of a personality trait than an illness, general anxiety, self-control) and/or socio-contextual factors (class size, instructor’s pedagogy, etc.) that impact their ability to participate within the classroom (McCrosky & Anderson, 1976). Scholars in the field of higher education (Kuh et al., 2005; Tinto, 1997) agree that student achievement is partly determined by students’ communication behavior/their ability to
verbally participate in classroom settings. However, college/university classrooms function as a space where students learn through questioning (for clarification and knowledge acquisition), but it simultaneously functioned as a method of student evaluation (McCrosky, 1977).

The result of this quantitative study raises some important questions regarding the role of voice and silence in college/university classrooms. Because of the intrinsically important role of communication/verbal participation in college/university education, McCrosky and Anderson (1976) raises the concern of the reliance on instructional systems emphasizing voluntary student initiated interaction where teachers penalize a large number of students suffering from communications apprehensions. “They are placed at a competitive disadvantage because they are too apprehensive to engage in the behaviors required to achieve success” (p. 80) by American college/university classroom standards. Although these studies are quite dated, they are significant to the current investigation, as they directly speak to the complexity of voice, as verbal participation, and silence for individuals in college/university classrooms.

In attempting to understand how Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in the college/university classroom, McCrosky and Anderson (1976) showed how psychological and institutional factors work together to shape and impact individual communication in classrooms. However, by citing a number of personality traits and socio-contextual factors that shape individual communication patterns McCrosky and Anderson’s (1976) study failed to examine how the interaction of class, gender, and racial identities shape the linguistic utterances of individuals.
It is established in the literature that psychological and institutional factors affect the voice and/or silence of women of color. However, because of the gendered and ethno-racial identities of women of color, verbally participating and voicing their opinions in the classroom is often linked to stereotypes of their race, class, and gender (Alemán, 2003; Collins, 2000; Hurtado, 1996). In other words, when a Black Woman or a Latina speaks in the classroom, she could be perceived by her peers as speaking for “all” people in her ethno-racial group, thus, increasing the significance of the words a woman of color may choose to say (or not to say). In contrast, one may speculate that a White woman in the classroom may not feel the same pressure, as she is allowed to speak as an individual and her words and experiences may not be perceived as indicative of all White women/people. Centering race and gender in this investigation is imperative to understanding the complexity and nuances of voice and silence for Black women and Latinas.

Summary

After reviewing the literature on individual voice and silence, racism and sexism are central issues shaping how women of color exercise their voice and silence within educational settings. In an attempt to contest the intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality, the aforementioned scholars agree that women of color distinctly use voice/outspokenness/loudness and silence as forms of resistance and survival within a White capitalist patriarchal heterosexist culture. Fordham’s (1993), Hurtado’s (1996), and Gal’s (1991) works exemplify that as a historically oppressed group, women of color have produced unique mechanisms designed to oppose their oppression. The production
of knowledge for women of color not only entails gaining information of the dominant
group, without repudiating their own culture or experience, but rather build from this
unique marginal position (Hurtado, 1996). Integrating cultural forms of the dominant
group, without compromising themselves or their cultural beliefs requires that women of
color apply silence and voice/outspokenness to navigate the academy. Whereas silence,
according to Hurtado, is mostly employed by women of color to acquire knowledge,
voice/outspokenness also has the potential to function as a source of power when women
of color know how to speak and when to speak within the classroom.

Building on this notion of voice and silence as strategies of resistance and
survival, Fordham’s (1993) ethnography is important because it speaks to how social
institutions (specifically families and schools) and individuals are shaped by political,
economic, and ideological systems that create and reproduce the negative controlling
images of Black women. Illustrating how African American adolescent girls vehemently
absorb and/or reflect the negative stereotypical images, they use voice/loudness and
silence as complimentary strategies of resistance and survival. Whereas some African
American girls use silence to deflect the negative images associated with the stereotypical
loud Black girls, others employ loudness to make themselves visible within an
environment that had rendered them invisible. Lorde’s (1984) works eloquently speak of
this concern:

Within this country where racial difference create a constant, if unspoken
distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly
visible and so on the other hand have been rendered invisible through the
depersonalization of racism. (p. 42)

Hence, for the African American girls who were loud, their visibility, which made them
vulnerable, was also a great source of strength and power. Whereas, those African
American girls who remained silent were praised and made visible because of their academic success, they were simultaneously invisible because of their lack of voice. This experience speaks to the complex and inherent contradictions within the lives of Black women, Latinas, and other women of color within the United States. Lastly, all the scholars seem to agree with Gal’s (1991) anthropological study that social location, sociopolitical and cultural context define the linguistic forms individuals employ in particular settings.

Conclusion

Evidence from a wide range of disciplines converge to suggest that the conceptualization of voice and silence is not only complex but is dynamic and emerges from a place of power that is embedded in language, institutions, culture, individuals, and society as a whole. It is established in the literature that voice and silence have a dual/contradictory function within classrooms that are entangled with personal reasons and cultural and institutional context.

Educational classroom settings are often a place where students experience personal and academic development. An essential component of student learning and development is verbal participation (talk, voice, speech) within classrooms. As the literature asserts, voice is based on empowerment and consciousness-raising through women’s speech and use of language. However, voice also had the capacity to silence and marginalize women who are unable to engage with the discussion at hand. Silence, which is more context embedded than speech, can also function to communicate and empower individuals, but it can simultaneously serve to oppress and marginalize women.
as well. This complex function of voice and silence within educational classroom settings addresses the need to examine this phenomenon for Black women and Latinas in light of the institutional, cultural, and social context in which it takes place. Moreover, understanding that individual identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic speaks to the conflicting linguistic expressions experienced by Black women and Latinas.

In general, this literature suggests that a need to investigate the distinct and complex experiences of Black women and Latinas within academic classroom settings is warranted. The lack of empirical research examining the ways gender and race are interdependent elements of identity that impact the personal and academic development of women of color in higher education is further grounds for this study. Moreover, the ethnographic studies (Fordham, 1993; Luke, 1994) examined were useful in understanding the difficult circumstances by which women/girls learn, but they were also quite dated. As such, this research seeks to conduct a hermeneutic phenomenological study of Black women and Latinas to examine how Black women and Latinas experience, understand, and make meaning of their voice and silence in a Women’s college classroom.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Bourdieu’s Theory of Linguistic Habitus**

Central to Bourdieu’s sociological inquiry of how cultural resources, practices and institutions function to maintain unequal social relations was his theory of linguistic exchange and language. Applying his theory of practice/habitus to language, Bourdieu developed a theory of linguistic habitus.
The linguistic habitus is a sub-set of the dispositions which comprise the habitus: it is that sub-set of dispositions acquired in the course of the learning to speak in particular context (the family, the peer group, the school, etc.). These dispositions govern both the subsequent linguistic practices of an agent and the anticipation of the value that linguistic products will receive in other fields or markets—in the labor market, for example, or in the institutions of secondary or tertiary education. (Thompson, 1991, p. 21)

Language as habitus referred to certain ways speech defined and provided individuals of particular communities, group membership. Linguistic exchanges, utterances, and language carry with them the group’s particular interests and orientations that display the group’s thought style (Thompson, 1991). For Bourdieu, variation in the forms of linguistic expression and speech was based on class variation (Thompson, 1991). To explain this phenomenon, Bourdieu explicitly illustrates how the lower-middle classes (petits-bourgeois) and the lower classes (working class) strived to obtain linguistic capital in order to maneuver within fields with relative ease.

Individuals from the petit-bourgeois background must make an effort to adapt their speech/linguistic expressions…[to reflect the upper class] as a result hyper correction results…Members of the lower class with the least conducive to the acquisition of habitus of formal market find it difficult to speak…hesitation leads to silence. (p. 21)

Lacking the means of legitimate expression, according to Bourdieu, led individuals to silence. Because social class affiliation is central to Bourdieu’s theory of language and power, it is the lower class who suffered from silence, as they strive to obtain or lack the linguistic capital to secure a profit of distinction. Linguistic competence yields linguistic capital. Individuals not endowed with the dominant language or lacking the dominant modes of language use were at a distinct disadvantage and eventually experienced symbolic violence. As such, “language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 20). In
emphasizing the links among language, power, and social stratification, Bourdieu introduced some original concepts and provocative ideas that are essential to this study on Black women and Latinas in college classrooms. However, Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic habitus cannot solely explain how Black and Latina women use voice and silence in the university classroom.

Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic habitus was based on a fairly rigid and class based determinist framework. For Bourdieu, linguistic difference was a result of class variation. However, class variation cannot solely explain the difference or lack of linguistic/verbal expressions by Black women and Latinas. Women’s structural location in cultural systems of unequal power located them in different relations to men (Luke, 1994) for example.

Public spaces for speech have been generally identified with paradigms of masculinity, rational discourse, absence or emotion developed logical arguments, control of representation and so on. The senate, congress, courts, universities, media, pulpits, publishing houses, professional conferences are places of public speech. These sites of public speech have been historically barred to women. Instead women were cosigned to the domestic space or private sphere where a certain type of talk was tolerated if it was about domestic issues, children and the home (Davies, 1995, p. 4).

The white, capitalist, patriarchal dominating systems with its historical and cultural inscriptions that defined the gendered and racial identity of Black women and Latinas have also devalued and framed their voices as unimportant (Davies, 1995; hooks, 1987).

Historically, black women (including women of African descent) were seen/are seen/have been seen as having nothing important to say (Davies, 1995). “When a black woman gets up in a crowd to speak or present herself publicly, she has to battle all the cultural and historical meanings about her even to begin to speak and then the content of her speaking is already framed as non-speech or not important” (p. 5). The boundaries
imposed to render Black women and Latinas’ incapable of full expression of their creativity and knowledge is based on a host of structural and ideological forms of oppression. As such, the denial of voice of Black women and Latinas is rooted in relationships of power and oppressive systems, more so than class variations, as Bourdieu suggest. With a loss of voice also comes a loss of self for women (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002). Thus, to come into their voice, Black and Latina feminists advocate a process of self-definition and a re-articulation of self that speaks of their many realities and experiences.

Black and Latina Feminism: Oppositional and Multiple Consciousness

The writing of Black and Latina feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Davies, 1995; hooks, 1987; 1989; Lorde, 1984) have addressed the need for finding multiple ways that women of color can raise their own voices and locate sources of their power. Through various forms of research, literature and essays women across cultures have recalled their own experience with voice and silence. The voices of Black and Latina feminists like Anzaldúa (1987) write about a “home tongue” (p. 55), where women of color communicate the realities and values that are true to themselves. Lorde (1984) refers to the transformation of silence into words to find the source of women’s power, the erotic. hooks’s (1989) concept of “transgressive speech” (p. 8) forces women to challenge situations of oppressions and power by talking back to authority when necessary, regardless of the consequences. In one way or another moving from silence to voice requires that Black women and Latinas engage in a process of (re) defining themselves and asserting their agency.
Silence, muteness, voicelessness, for women of color, must be understood in the context of a racist, sexist, and classiest society that acts to suppress and marginalize their multiple identities. Informed by centuries of struggle, erasure and experience Black and Latina feminist scholars, (Anzaldúa 1987; Beale, 1995; Collins, 2000; Davies 1995, hooks, 1989; 1994) argue that Black women and Latinas are in a unique position to challenge the negative images existing about their identities. Although these women have either passively absorbed the controlling images (that have been central to their dehumanization and exploitation) or vehemently resisted them, Black women and Latinas are able to survive in a racist, sexist, and classist society by culturally navigating in multiple worlds. “The reality of racism and sexism means that we [women of color] must configure our private realities to include an awareness of what our public image might mean to others” (Jackson, 2002, p. 36). In other words, Black women and Latinas (and all other women of color) inherently live in two worlds (or multiple worlds) in order to transcend the confines of the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sex. In doing so,

We must integrate without compromising ourselves or our beliefs. We must retain our cultural selves and run the risk of scaring the white folks we work with and for. We must constantly filter our experiences, screening for racism in each moment, while still being a team player. We must be able to culturally navigate both worlds, working side-by-side with folks who are only vested in their own white world. (Jackson, 2002, p. 3)

Existing and living in an “outsider-within”(Collins, 2000) and “academic self woman of color other” (Asher, 2001) status entailed interacting and gaining knowledge of a dominant group without repudiating one’s cultural experience, but rather building from this unique marginal position (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Asher, 2001; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Jackson, 2002). Chicana feminist and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa
(1987) best describes the outsider-within/border crossing process as a state of reaching a “nueva conciencia” (p. 77) “new consciousness.” Depicting the strength and creativity of the unique marginal position of the New Mestiza (who lives in two, three, four worlds), Anzaldúa (1987) argues,

The new Mestiza copes by developing. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality she operates in a pluralistic mode (nothing is thrust out, the good bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned). (p. 79)

Illustrating how the new Mestiza (a Latina, Mexican American, lesbian scholar), creates a new consciousness by being “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures and straddling all three cultures and their value systems” (p. 77), Anzaldúa explicitly argues that the outsider-within process of culturally navigating many worlds, brings Latina and women of color to self-definition, self-reflection and self-valuation. Hence, as Black women and Latinas become aware of their position within a racist, classist, sexist, oppressive environment, they enter a process of consciousness-raising. This recognition and understanding of their particular positionality allows Black women and Latinas to become self-reflexive in order to challenge and express their resistance (Davies, 1995). Although this process of consciousness-raising can be intensely painful, the strength lies in understanding and embracing the ambiguities of their outsider-within status.

When a woman of color develops a new consciousness, they transform silence into voice. A woman transgresses, she moves beyond, becoming empowered to express her personal creative power, personal passions, erotic thus engaging in transformational politics (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984).

Women of color in the U.S. must not only transform silence into our native speech, but as immigrants, Chicanas, Latinas and speakers of Black or different varieties of Asian English…we must learn a foreign tongue—standard American
English, a language laden with alien ideologies which are often in direct opposition to those in our own cultures. (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxii)

Hence, when Black women and Latinas come into possession of a voice, they also have to choose with which voice (as a Latina, Black, woman, student, lesbian) in which voice (formal, slang), or in which language (Spanish, Spanglish, Black vernacular) to speak because of their multiple identities/outsider-within status (Anzaldúa, 1990). Because of these factors, the full expression of Black women and Latinas voices is more complicated than simply lacking linguistic capital. Social structures and ideologies still exist that deny women of color the ability to voice their creative expressions.

Summary

The concepts of linguistic habitus and outsider-within (oppositional/multiple consciousness) are useful theoretical tools for this study. Bourdieu’s (1977) linguistics habitus forces one to examine how social institutions (family and schools specifically) function to provide individuals with linguistic expressions/forms that influence individual dispositions and preferences, which in turn affects how individuals interact with their social world. Central to understanding linguistic variations/exchanges within and among groups is social class affiliation, as it has the ability to provide individuals with linguistic competency or linguistic deficiency. Overall, the concept of linguistic habitus will be employed in this study as it emphasizes the link among language, power, and social stratification of individuals within the larger society.

Not completely diverging from Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of linguistic habitus, Black and Latina feminists complicate his theory by illustrating how language and the politics of voice and silence for Black women and Latinas are intricately linked to the
development of women’s identities under marginality and oppression. By emphasizing a need to recognize multiple identities and their outsider within status, Black and Latina feminists provide a complicated analysis of voice and silence that is fluid, multidimensional, and varies within spacial-temporal locations (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984). Like Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of linguistic habitus, Black and Latina feminists agree that silence, very much like language and voice, is a product of ones socialization, acculturation, and/or assimilation process within a racist, sexist, patriarchal society. Black and Latina feminist also recognize that women of color are not a monolithic group. For example, black women occupy a range of class positions in a variety of societies. Fundamental differences in the historical, cultural and socioeconomic factors also exist between U.S. Latinas and Latinas from Latin America and Spanish speaking Caribbean. These factors further complicate how women come to express their voice and silence. Nevertheless, the reality of black women and Latinas’ experience under oppression in the U.S. makes it so that the full expression of their reality and experiences have been denied and rendered invisible (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Collins, 2000; Davies, 1995; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984). Many researchers and practitioners have ignored the fact that all individuals are embedded in culture and societal context impact women differently based on their social standing. Because, race, ethnicity, and class are factors that influence the experiences of women, the intersection of these factors merits closer examination so that issues of voice and silence can be understood, particularly for women of color, who have been shut out and therefore silenced from research (Iglesias & Cormier 2002).

Henceforth, this paper employs the theoretical tools of linguistic habitus and feminist concept of oppositional/multiple consciousness (as conceptualized through
outsider-within) to examine the intricacies of voice and silence in the lived experience of
Black women and Latinas in women’s colleges. Because the research on voice and silence,
particularly as it relates to diverse populations, is in its infancy this study seeks to fill a
void in the literature by introducing new ideas, models that advance the knowledge and
understanding of Black women and Latinas, while building bridges of understanding
among ethno-racial groups. As such, this research employs hermeneutic phenomenology to
conduct in depth examinations to understand how Black women and Latinas experience,
understand and engage their voice and silence within Women’s college classrooms.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Seeking to understand how Black women and Latinas’ experience, understand, and make meaning of their voice and silence (in relation to their academic experience) within women’s college classrooms, hermeneutic phenomenology was the most suitable methodological approach for this study. Unlike previous studies (Belenky et al., 1986; Fordham, 1993; Luke 1994) that have employed an ethnographic research genre to observe and analyze the activities of women and women of color in distinct educational settings, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon (voice and silence) as experienced by the individuals (Black women and Latinas).

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Perspective

Recognized by many as the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl defined phenomenology as essentially the study of lived conscious experiences or the life world of individuals (Laverty, 2003). Within phenomenology, the emphasis is on the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person (Laverty, 2003). Central to this early philosophical development of phenomenology is an emphasis on the return and re-examination of the taken for granted experiences to uncover new and/or forgotten meanings through description, intentional analysis, and examination of conscious experiences (Laverty, 2003). For Husserl, consciousness or access to the structures of consciousness results in grasping the phenomena under investigation (Laverty, 2003). Consciousness and its formations possess the essential features of knowledge (Edmer et al.,
Within phenomenology, conscious experiences have a unique feature because individuals experience them, live through them, and/or perform them (Edmer et al., 1997). In other words, “conscious awareness was the starting point in building one’s knowledge of reality. By intentionally directing one’s focus on a phenomenon, Husserl proposed one could develop a description of particular realities” (Laverty, 2003, p. 5-6). Although all phenomenology (transcendental, naturalistic, existential, generative, genetic, realistic, and hermeneutical phenomenology) thematize human awareness, phenomenology became hermeneutical when it argued that every form of human awareness is interpretive (Embree et al., 1997).

Hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Heidegger and later advanced by Gadamer (Laverty, 2003). Like phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with life experience as it is lived in the world (Laverty, 2003). Both hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology focus on illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experiences that may be taken for granted in our lives (Laverty, 2003). Both have an ultimate goal of creating and achieving a sense of understanding (Laverty, 2003). However, the way this exploration of lived experiences proceeds is where Husserl and Heidegger/Gadamer differ. While Husserl focused on understanding beings and/or phenomenon through reflection of mental states where consciousness is seen as separate from the world, for Heidegger, “consciousness is not separate from the world, but a formation of historically lived experience” (p. 8).

Heidegger erased any distinction between the individual and experience, interpreting them as co-constituting each other and unable to exist without the other (Laverty, 2003). For Heidegger, nothing can be encountered without references to a
person’s background understanding (Laverty, 2003). “Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences” (p. 8). Thus, within hermeneutic phenomenology, “interpretation is seen as critical to this process of understanding” (p. 9). All understanding is connected to a given fore-structure, including one’s historicality, that cannot be eliminated (Laverty, 2003). Gadamer further developed Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology idea by suggesting that understanding and interpretation are not separate, but are bound together (Laverty, 2003). Interpretation is always an evolving process, because a definitive interpretation is likely never possible (Laverty, 2003). However, one can attempt to analyze the interpretive nature of a phenomenon by conducting textual descriptions (what was experienced) and structural description (how the phenomenon was experienced) to develop an interpretation (overall essence) of the experience under investigation (Creswell, 1998). As such, employing a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was selected for this study because hermeneutic phenomenology:

- is particularly interested in the complexities and diversities of our societies as experienced by the individual (Laverty, 2003).

- gets at the essence of the phenomenon/situation by examining (the unit of analysis), the relationship between the situation/phenomenon and the person living the experience (Laverty, 2003).

- provides a description and analyses of the lived experience/phenomenon is understood as personally meaningful constructions that shape the experience and interpretation of the world in which the individual lives (Laverty, 2003).
is interested in what is shared in culture, history, practice, language, by the individuals experiencing the phenomenon under investigation (Laverty, 2003).

In light of the theoretical underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology, this study examined how Black women and Latinas understand, experience, and reflect on their experiences of voice and silence within women’s college classrooms. Following the structure of in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing, the aforementioned bullets/points were employed in the analysis and findings section of this study to illustrate how participants addressed, understood and reflected upon their experience of voice and silence. Moreover, by employing hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus of the analysis was to highlight how each participant shared her experience of the phenomenon as well as her interpretation of it.

Research Questions

As someone who shares a Black and Latina ethno-racial identity, research on voice and silence was important to my work as an educator. As a graduate student pursuing a doctoral degree, I found myself having reservations of the classroom as a safe learning environment. Having experienced discomfort and dissonance within the higher education classroom, there were moments I did not speak. Individuals who know me well found it hard to believe that I could experience voicelessness in the classroom. It seemed as though I stopped myself from speaking before anyone else had the opportunity to do so. As a result, I became interested in the dynamics of voice and silence for women of color in collegiate classrooms. In an attempt to understand the origins of silence/voicelessness within the classroom, I began this research, setting out to
understand the following research questions: How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom? What meanings do Black women and Latinas’ ascribe to their voice and silence? What do Black women and Latinas’ perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence?

It is my hope that with this study a deeper understanding of the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas is reached. As mentioned previously, because the research on voice and silence, particularly as it relates to diverse populations, is limited, this study will fill a void in the literature by introducing new ideas, and models that advance the knowledge and understanding of Black women and Latinas while building bridges of understanding among ethno-racial groups.

Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate the aforementioned research questions, in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing was the data collection method employed.

**Method**

**Institutional Characteristic**

The collegiate institutional profile for this study was obtained from various offices, publications, and websites. To protect the anonymity of the institutional identity a pseudonym has been given to the institution.
Noel College

Noel College is a highly selective, nondenominational, residential, liberal arts college for women. Recognized worldwide for its global community and innovative academic programs, its legacy of women leaders, and its commitment to connecting the work of the academy to the concerns of the world, Noel College attracts a diverse range of students and faculty members. Offering a Bachelor’s of Arts or Science, Noel College has a student population of less than 5,000 students. Noel’s students come from all 50 states and a number of countries. Approximately one in every three Noel College student is an international citizen or African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latina, and/or Native American student.

Emphasizing a legacy of academic excellence for women, Noel College is committed to creating female scholars and leaders for the 21st century. Noel College takes pride in its ability to provide women with the best educational facilities available for cognitive development. Lastly, the culture of Noel is one that values academic excellence, cross-cultural education, learning and knowledge, while respecting and promoting a multicultural environment for all its students.

Gaining Entry and Securing Student Participants

To gain entry into Noel College and to gain access to its student population, an IRB (Institutional Review Board) proposal was sent via email (and a hard copy by mail) to the Chief Academic officer of the institution and the Office of Sponsored Research. The purpose of this proposal was to provide Noel College’s IRB board an explicit proposal detailing the purpose and nature of this research. The proposal included an
explanation of the purpose of the research and proposed research activities scheduled to occur. A research description, including research procedures, recruitment of participants, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality were included along with a proposed work plan for data collection on the campus. The IRB board approved the research proposal spring 2008.

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval, the Dean of Students was contacted by a formal letter (see Appendix A) to obtain access to Black women and Latinas attending Noel College. The letter served four functions: (1) it briefly described the study to be conducted; (2) it provided a justification as to why the study needed to be conducted; (3) it served to obtain demographic information about Black women and Latinas (specifically the numeric breakdown of Black women and Latinas attending the college and the total number of Black women and Latinas who were juniors and seniors); and (4) it also served as a request to the Dean of Students, asking her to email a letter of invitation to all Black women and Latina juniors and seniors to encourage them to participate in the study (see Appendix B).

The first attempt to recruit Black women and Latinas who were juniors and/or seniors, was via the aforementioned invitation letter sent by email from the Dean of Students office. Because access to students’ emails was not readily available, as an outsider to the institutional community, I requested that an invitation letter be emailed from the Dean of Students, on my behalf, to all Black women and Latina juniors and seniors. This invitation letter served as initial contact with all Black and Latina juniors
and seniors to encourage them to participate in the study. One benefit of this method of recruiting participants was the ability to reach the total eligible population of Black women and Latinas who were juniors and seniors at the institution. However, one concern was waiting for the women to contact me to express interest in participating in the study.

Initially, the target population was going to be limited to juniors and seniors because previous research has suggested that juniors and seniors have a better understanding of their academic experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Likewise, freshmen and sophomores were not going to be included in the study because these same studies suggested that freshman and sophomores are still being acclimated into institutional culture and academic life (Astin, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and this lack of experience could potentially impact how they understand their use of voice and silence as it relates to their academic classroom experience. However, due to the limited number of Black and Latina junior and seniors at Noel College, the sample pool was extended to include freshman and sophomore students as well.

Of the total undergraduate class (2,100 students) in 2007-2008, Black women made up .04% and Latinas made up .03% of matriculating students. According to Noel College’s student demographics of 2007-2008, a total of 58 Latinas/Hispanics and 80 African American/Blacks were matriculating in 2007-2008 (these numbers only represent students who identified as “Latina/Hispanic” or “African American/Black”). From the 58 Latinas, 13 were juniors and 13 were seniors. Of the 80 African American/Black women enrolled, 24 were seniors and 14 were juniors. Hence getting only juniors and seniors to commit to this study was unfeasible due to the student demographics. Moreover, many
seniors, during the spring academic term worked on their thesis and other projects, as they prepared for graduation, and many juniors were participating in domestic exchange or study abroad programs. Their academic demands in conjunction with the number of Black women and Latinas attending Noel College made it difficult to have a sample of solely juniors and seniors. As such, getting a sample of Black women and Latinas that represented a range of academic class years was more conducive to this study. It also served as a method of maximum variation sampling of participants.

The second recruitment technique implemented to get Black and Latina participants was a group contact visit with members from the Black and Latina student organizations. A letter was sent to the organization’s Co-Chairs describing the purpose of the study and the need for Black women and Latinas to participate (see Appendix C). This group contact visit helped identify participants, and it helped build a foundation for the interview relationship that eventually developed. By making a group contact visit to introduce myself and the study, I initiated the process of informed consent, which is necessary for almost all interviewing research. Once a date and time was secured to conduct a group contact visit, participants who were interested in taking part in the study were identified and dates and times were arranged to obtain informed consent and conduct interviews.

In addition to the other recruitment techniques, flyers (see Appendix D) were posted in the library and student center of Noel College. These were ideal locations as students tend to frequent these areas regularly. Flyers were posted in the entrance of these buildings, bulletin boards, and near student mailboxes in the student center. Emails were also sent to colleagues and faculty members (who were aware of my research) within the
Political Science, Anthropology, Women Studies, Latin American Studies, Afro-American Studies and Psychology departments to help identify potential students. All of these recruitment techniques aided in identifying nine women who participated in this study; one Afro-Latina (Dominican American), three Black women (two African American one Bi-racial), one Afro-Caribbean (Jamaican) and four Latinas (Two Puerto Rican, one Colombian and one Mexican American). Participants were international and U.S. born Black women and Latinas. In terms of their program year, the study included three juniors, three sophomores, two freshmen and one senior. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. In addition, all other potentially identifying information, such as names, places, or events were changed in order to protect the anonymity of the institution and any associated members.

**Sampling**

Purposeful sampling or sampling for information-rich cases was used in this study. This specific sampling strategy was employed to intentionally generate a diverse sample of Black women and Latinas. Although criterion sampling has been the strategy mostly used in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998), the information rich cases generated by purposeful sampling provided the opportunity to identify and explore themes that influenced the use of voice and silence of Black women and Latinas as it related to their academic classroom experience. Considering that this research is interested in generating data that will best help explain the aforementioned experience, maximum variation sampling (a type of purposeful sampling) provided the best data.
Maximum variation sampling aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a number of participants (Patton, 1990. For small samples, (like in this study) a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other (Patton, 1990).

Maximum variation sampling strategy turns this apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variations are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program. (p. 53) or phenomenon. Hence, the question remained, how does one then maximize variation in a small sample? According to Patton, “one begins by selecting diverse characteristics for constructing the sample” (p. 53).

For this study, those diverse characteristics consisted of the participants’ ethno-racial identity and their majors (humanities, social sciences, STEM fields, natural science, etc.). These characteristics were employed not only to determine the number of participants to be interviewed in this study; it assisted in yielding two kinds of findings: “high quality detailed descriptions of each case which are useful for documenting uniquenesses, and important shared patterns which cut across cases and which derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (Patton, 1990, p. 53). Thus, by selecting a sample of individuals whom I determine have had different experiences (selecting both Latinas and Black women within diverse majors), it was possible, as Patton (1990) suggests “to describe more thoroughly the variations in the group and to understand variations in experiences” (p. 55), while investigating core elements and shared outcomes that Black women and Latinas have. By utilizing maximum variation sampling this study did not attempt to generalize or essentialize the experiences of Black
women andLatinastoallBlackwomenandLatinas;ratherthisstudyhighlightedthe
everiationsandcommonpatternsthatharmonedwithinthesamplestudied.

Data Collection: In-depth Phenomenological Interviewing

In order to “understand the deep meaning of a person’s experience and how
he/she articulates those lived experiences” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 97),
 phenomenologicalresearchisbasedonextensiveandprolongedengagementwith
individualsexperiencingthephemomenonunderinvestigation(Creswell,1998;Rossman
& Rallis, 2003). To get at the quintessential meaning/essence of the
experience/phenomenonunderinvestigation,threeseparate90-minute,indepth,
intensive,iterativeinterviewswereconductedwitheachofthenineparticipants
(Creswell,1998;Rossman&Rallis,2003).

Asamethodofinquiry,oneofthemostimportantcharacteristicsof
phenomenologyistheemphasisonnarrativeresearchachievedthroughtheindepth
interviewprocess.Havingaseriesof90minutинтерviewsallowstheparticipantsto
reflectontheirexperience.Thus,asubjectiveunderstandingisgainedfromthe
participantsexperiencingthephemomenonunderinvestigation(Seidman,1998).Assuch,
thephenomenologicalapproachwasthemostsuitableforthisstudycsquseitheroffereda
microcosmoftheconsciousnessoftheparticipants.Itallowedparticipants toselect
particulardetailsoftheexperience,reflectonthemandgivethemandorderwhilemaking
senseofthem(Seidman,1998).

Withinthisstudy,thefirstsetof90-minuteinterviewquestionsfocusedonlife
history,whichrequiredparticipantstoreconstructandshareasmuchaspossibleabout
their early educational classroom experience (taking into consideration their family, friends, neighborhood, etc.). The second set of questions allowed participants to reflect on the concrete details of their current academic classroom experience, regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The aim of these questions was to have participants reflect on their current experience by asking them to describe and provide details, rather than asking their opinion. Finally, the third set of questions allowed participants to reflect upon the information provided in order to generate an overall essence/meaning of their academic experience. During the third interview, participants focused on the information generated from the two previous interviews and made meaning of their experience, thus, making the meaning generating process the center of the third interview (see Appendix E for interview questions, Appendix F for informed consent form and Appendix G for participant information form).

Conducting three separate 90 minute interviews, at least 3 days to 1 week apart (Seidman, 1998) was necessary for participants to reconstruct their experience. This allowed time for the participants to mull over the preceding interviews, but not enough time had passed for the participants to lose or forget the connection between the interviews (Seidman, 1998). In addition, this spacing allowed me (the researcher) to work with the participants over a 2- to 3-week period, which reduced the possibility of peculiar interviews (Seidman, 1998). Six of the nine women interviewed were in accordance with Seidman’s suggestion of spacing and time for interviews, three of the student participants interviewed in a span 3 to 5 weeks, due to their academic and family obligations. Nevertheless, all the data were gathered following the phenomenological structure of reflecting on the past and present experiences.
The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events of the present led participants to where they are now (Seidman, 1998). As such, respecting the structure and process of in-depth phenomenological interviewing was necessary to allow participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives.

Data Analysis

The analysis of interviews transcripts was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1987, p. 306). Data collection and data analysis was ongoing throughout the research process. Data received from interviews were transcribed verbatim, between April 2008 to September 2008 and analyzed following the phenomenological method. The first step of data analysis was to create and organize files for data management (Creswell, 1998). In order to reduce the volume of data to the most meaningful, interview transcripts were read, reread, and reflected upon to initiate the coding process. Following this process, a profile of each participant was created to illustrate their distinct personal narratives. Profile construction involved gleaning pages of interview transcript to identify a vast array of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that were most salient and important to each woman. Compelling passages were identified, marked, and organized to create nine personal profiles. Materials presented in the profiles were arranged in a logical order of how women expressed their lived experiences. Developing personal profiles of each participant not only illustrated the rich, distinctive, multi-layered account
of their lives; it highlighted how each woman, experienced, defined, and reflected upon situations and actions in their lives. Although Seidman (1998) suggests that profiles be written in the first person (the voice of the participant) rather than the third person (the transformation of voice), for the purposes of this research, I employed a blended first and third person approach, suggested by Velmans (2007).

Velmans’ (2007) research on critical phenomenology suggests that first and third person accounts of a phenomenon or the mind can be treated as complementary and mutually irreducible. Instead of being confined to the first person or third person approach, critical phenomenology is reflexive (Velmans, 2007). “It is not a phenomenology of another or simply a phenomenology of oneself, rather it is a phenomenology of another and oneself” (p. 5). As such, to be faithful to the words and lived experiences of the participants, the profiles were presented and organized in the order in which they were discussed in the interview. Quotes from the participants were also used throughout the profiles to allow the reader to learn about how these women experienced and understood their voice and silence within the collegiate classroom. As such, a blended/mixed approach in crafting the participant personal profiles was most authentic and suitable for this research.

After creating personal profiles of each participant, I returned to the original interview data and worked closely and intensively with the transcripts to begin the round of analysis and coding process. The coding process began by reexamining the entire transcript of each participant to understand how voice and silence was understood and experienced in classrooms. A search within individual narratives for statements that had significant meaning for the participants followed. After reading and rereading statements,
I bracketed the most compelling passages/statements and inserted my interpretative/formulated meaning in the margins of the transcript (as to not change the original intent of the participant). The extraction of significant statements/passages/phrases was all related to the study of voice and silence in the lived experience of Black women and Latinas. Examples of significant statements and interpretive meanings include:

- Statement- “I was labeled remedial and I couldn’t possibly go to college right away because they wouldn’t accept me. So I graduated high school and I knew I wasn’t going to go to college.”
  Interpretive meaning: Labeled as underachiever/remedial shaped her future and her motivation to pursue a college education.

- Statement: “I felt like I had this emotional thing going. Do I belong here? I am always second guessing myself. Just being in this place like this, it was very difficult because you are surrounded by young women and you know I am 28 years old and I have a family. My situation is so much different.”
  Interpretive Meaning: College environment forced her to question (maybe doubt) her academic abilities, confidence, and sense of belonging. Feeling out of place, could experience social identity threat.

This aspect of data analysis was most challenging because I found myself questioning whether I had given each statement the appropriate interpretive meaning. But like Seidman (1998) suggests, one needs to trust and be confident in one’s ability as a researcher to conduct rigorous research.
Following Seidman’s (1998) suggestion, the most meaningful passages/statements were then cut, organized, tentatively labeled and placed on poster size adhesive notes for the continued coding process. Concepts, ideas, code notes, and memos were documented in a journal to further assist with the analysis process. To identify patterns among the participants’ statements/passages, constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was also employed to examine the similarities and differences among the participants’ experience. Line, sentence and paragraph segments of the transcribed interviews were reviewed to decide what codes fit the concepts suggested by the data. Because a single model or matrix of formulating categories cannot be imposed on all text, as a researcher being sensitive to conflicts existing between people or within a person, being aware of frustrations and resolutions, rare expressions of collegiality and community, and having an awareness to how issues of class, race, ethnicity, and gender manifested themselves in the narratives (Seidman, 1998) was essential to the coding process and creation of categories. The categories that emerged from wrestling with the data were the following Family/Social Communities, Educational Environments, Racial Dynamics, Identity, Language (Private vs. Public) Voice/Participation and Silence. Before I began the process of identifying themes, I wanted to ensure that the categories that emerged from the data were in fact true to the participants’ experiences. As such, I conducted yet another step in the data analysis process and created data matrix/tables of the 27 transcripts.

During this process, I read, reread, and scrutinized the transcripts to extract statements that specifically addressed how each participant answered the three overarching research questions for this study: How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom? What
meaning do Black Women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence? What do Black women and Latinas perceive to be the academic implications/ramifications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence? Because there were so many significant statements, I had to be very cautious to ensure that the statements were actually about the experienced phenomenon. Some statements were significant to me, but were not necessarily about voice and silence. Therefore, I carefully pulled out those passages/statements that specifically addressed how the participants described, understood, experienced, and made meaning of their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom. Conducting this additional level of analysis was beneficial because it allowed me to fine tune the categories and identify the differences and similarities within the participants’ experience. This process also allowed me to search for connecting threads and patterns between the excerpts (within the categories) that helped identify the four major themes of this study.

**Thematic Connections**

One central feature of phenomenological research is that the results are organized and presented in a structure of interrelated themes derived from research interviews. Themes serve as a form of simplifying the complexities of the text, connecting events in meaningful ways; they are “like knots in the webs of our experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 90).

A theme allows the investigator to convey what is essential to make an experience what it is for the experiencer, and the particular structure of themes present in an experience is what distinguishes that experience from other types of experiences. (Graves, 2006, p. 125)

Themes in this research emerged from the participants’ meanings and a shared meaning by participant and researcher alike. The major themes were consistent elements of the
participants’ narrative that emerged from variation on how each participant described some experience of the phenomenon. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis:

- The Linguistic Habitus of Black women and Latinas
- The Bitter Sweetness of the Collegiate Classroom
- Voice: Literal Voice and Symbolic Voice
- Silence(s)

Sub-themes/sub headings were also generated that seemed to flow into one of the above themes in one way or another. Chapter 5 will provide an explicit description of the themes and the phenomenon as experienced by the participants.

**Trustworthiness**

The basic question regarding trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry is “how can an inquirer persuade his or her audience that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking into account of?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). A number of qualitative research scholars (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Patton; 1987; Piantanida & Garman, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) have written extensively about standards of quality and verification in qualitative research. To ensure credibility and rigor within this study, the following strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness.

As a method of inquiry, the three separate 90-minute structure of in-depth phenomenological interviewing incorporated features that enhanced the accomplishment of validity and rigor. Interviews with participants’ spanned the course of 2 to 5 weeks, which accounted for days where unexpected issues/circumstances emerged. This also
provided the opportunity to check for internal consistency of what they said (member check). Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, I connected their experiences and checked the comments of one participant against those of the others. Thus, the structure of the three interviews, the passage of time over which the interviews occurred, the internal consistency and possible external consistency of the passages; the language, syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects of the passages from the interviews were employed to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability within this study (Seidman, 1998). In addition to conducting member checks with the participants, transferability was ensured through employing maximum variation sampling.

Maximum variation sampling yielded detailed descriptions of each case, in addition to identifying shared patterns that cut across cases. It also highlights the uniqueness that emerged from the heterogeneity of the samples (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). As such, maximum variation sampling, as a strategy of purposeful sampling, generated information that revealed variations and significant common patterns within that variation that was an example of transferability. Confirmability of the study was secured through the use of a critical friend.

Serving as an intellectual supervisor who advised me on the development of possible analytic categories and solid explanations of the phenomenon of interest, my dissertation chair served as a critical friend during this process. In the course of this study, I learned to consult my dissertation committee. Members of my committee also provided the necessary oversight for my dissertation. All phases of my research were submitted to my dissertation chair and then subject to the scrutiny and review of the
committee. They served as my consultants and advisors, providing guidance along the way and critical comments on my dissertation drafts when necessary.

Finally as a researcher, throughout this process I have attempted to be as transparent as possible, not merely as a researcher examining how Black women and Latinas experience, understand, and make meaning of their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom but also as an educator. By being transparent about my own experience and challenges with voice and silence within collegiate classrooms I make myself visible as a researcher as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer. As such, I kept a journal of any preconceptions or bias, to emphasize the importance of making clear how my preconceived notions were impacting the interpretations and meanings of the phenomenon experienced by Black women and Latinas. Thus, the prolonged engagement inherent in the structure of in depth phenomenologically based interviewing, the use of maximum variation sampling, the use of a critical friend and peer debriefing with my committee, and my transparency as a researcher ensures trustworthiness within this study.

**Summary**

In sum, phenomenological method is particularly effective in this research because it highlights the experiences and perceptions of Black women and Latinas’ from their own perspectives and therefore challenges structural or normative assumptions about how they experience and understand voice and silence, thus, adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research. Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth synopsis of each
participant. This is followed by Chapter 5, the findings, which describes in thematic form the voice and silence of Black women and Latinas.
CHAPTER 4
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Individual profiles were conducted to highlight the lived experience of each participant. Profiles were developed from individual interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of each participant and to show how each participant is distinct. These personal profiles provide a biographical synopsis of each female participant including but not limited to their educational experience with regards to their academic voice and silence. To maintain anonymity of each participant, explicit details have been limited and names and locations broaden.

Eve

The dysfunctional foundation of Eve’s family began to unfold unexpectedly in our first interview. Soft spoken and shy (at times), but quite astute and confident, no one could ever imagine that at the age of 20, Eve had escaped drug abuse, survived domestic violence, and poverty to attend one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the United States.

Background

Born and raised in an urban city in the Midwest, Eve vividly recalled her early memories of a violent and belligerent family upbringing.

I think around 5 or 6 when my mother and father started to get into a lot of arguments because my father was doing drugs, and most of my vivid memories come from that time period, and over a while my mom got really depressed and started suffering from severe depression, like bipolar disorder, and she had a lot of health problems.
Describing her father as emotionally and physically absent and her mother as depressed and overworked, Eve managed to raise herself.

I just grew up a lot faster than what I wanted to. I just remember having to take care of myself whether it was learning to fix myself noodles or cereal or remembering that my mom put this up in the back of the refrigerator just so I can feed myself.

Eve’s mother was forced to hide food in back of the refrigerator and other places in the house to prevent Eve’s drug addicted father and ruffian brother from eating all of the food. At one point, Eve was forced to confront her father for having a cocaine party. This was the first time that Eve verbally challenged her father.

He had this cocaine party once, and I remember like peaking down the stairs, because he told me to stay upstairs, “Don’t come down here” and of course I didn’t listen. So I walked down the stairs and peeked my head down, and I just remember seeing a bunch of people sitting around our table. And in the middle of it, I just saw a whole bunch of white stuff and bags and so many bags… and I started seeing people shooting up… I automatically thought, “Oh, no, no.” My mom was at work, and I remember my mom had told my father, “Don’t bring that stuff in my house or around my children.”… I looked at him and said to him, “Why do you have this in our house? My mommy told you not to bring this stuff in her house near her children,” and I could just remember saying, “Get it out the house. Get out of my house!” And like people didn’t know what to do. So they started leaving.

Experiencing such hardships had an emotional and physical toll on Eve. She not only began to noticeably lose weight, she experienced depression as well. Nevertheless, in the midst of this chaos, Eve was resilient and persevered academically. Much of this academic drive stemmed from her mother’s desire to keep Eve preoccupied with reading and math so as not to notice the arguments and drugs within the household.

Because I had to wait a year to start school, I tried to find as many books that I could possibly find [in the house], and my mom used to try and find me books and stuff that she would get on her way to work, and I would just be doing that for hours and just reading and writing and just trying to figure it out. Like, “What does this mean? What is this and what is that?” and I love math, and I love reading, and I liked science books. I think they were zoo books… so I really used
that to occupy my time and granted I was a curious child… I took reading as my focus.

When Eve finally began her middle school education, she continued to use her education and learning as a strategy of coping with the emotional abuse and physical violence experienced in her household. As such, Eve immersed herself in her academics.

I got straight A’s through middle school. Again because the work really wasn’t that challenging…I was also involved in a lot of extracurricular activities even in elementary school that kept me busy…I was always going somewhere because I was on the principal’s list…but I got teased a lot from other people in school because they thought I knew everything…so I was trying really hard to forget about the opinions of other people and understand that I was in school to learn not to be popular. But to learn and get an education, that was always my focus in elementary school to middle school. I also participated in academic games, and I always did the math part. I came up with mathematical equations. You had to solve the equations. We actually went to Nationals. I don’t ever remember getting into too much trouble…So I studied and worked because I learned at an early age that if I wanted anything, I had to save [because her parents were not in a financial situation where they could give].

All her extracurricular involvement and studies paid off when she was admitted to a prestigious high school for gifted students.

Educational Transition: From the Inner City School to Elite Preparatory High School

Upon receiving a full academic scholarship to attend an elite college preparatory school in the Midwest, Eve immersed herself in a new academic and social setting. Although students were less racially diverse and more financially privileged, Eve enthusiastically expressed her delight about interacting with students who were academically motivated and engaged with course materials. The educational environment was also different.

I was so shocked for a good year being there and then I am in class and I am like taking a test and nobody is talking, nobody is trying to get the answers from
anyone. The teacher leaves the room, I am like, “Oh my God? What is this?” We had study hall and people are quiet and doing their work. Wow! I was excited, I was like, “Oh, wow!”

She began to value her education much more because she was being challenged and motivated by her teachers.

My teachers really wanted me to learn things, and I got really excited when I was asking questions and coming in for extra help…[In class] I would raise my hands and ask questions. Even though I knew the answer, I still wanted to ask. This was the first time I saw participation grades, and I was like, “Oh, no. I got to talk.”

Although it took Eve roughly 4 to 6 hours every night to complete her homework, she enjoyed the academic rigor and student engagement. She had peers who were interested in her perspective and motivated to learn. Eve also had teachers who were encouraging and listened to her suggestions.

I could finally talk to people about what was important, without being ignored…like if I understood something I was like, “Ok. Well wait, let me ask a question anyway. So I would raise my hands ask, “What is this?” Even though I knew the answer…That was the first time I saw participation grades, and I knew I needed to talk more.

Regardless of Eve’s academic commitment, she was unable to completely separate herself from her mother’s destructive behavior.

In the beginning of her senior year, her grades slipped from a 3.7 to a 2.7, due the abusive relationship with her mother.

[Driving home from a party] I get back and my mom came out of nowhere. She scared the shit out of me… She asked, “Why do you keep doing this to me?” I was like, “Mom, what are you talking about? I was trying to be honest with you and let you know what I was doing.” The next thing you know, I got punched in the face, thrown into the couch, and I was just like, “Wow, did she really just hit me in my face?”

This type of treatment continued for a few months before she disclosed the abuse to her principal. An intervention immediately followed, which ultimately resulted in a spike in
her GPA from 2.7 to 3.4. “Realizing how close I was to Cum Laude, really upset me, but I was kind of happy at the same time because I was able to balance all that hell at home plus school, sports, work. It just really meant a lot to me that my teachers respected me, and at the end of the year I got this special faculty award named in my honor.” Despite early evidence of her ability to communicate and do well in her academics, in college Eve described her classroom experience as frustrating, but partly rewarding.

Frustrating and Partly Rewarding at Noel College

As a sophomore with a self-designed major in exercise neuroscience/kinesiology, Eve’s collegiate classroom experience can at best be understood as a complex struggle of internal (personal) and external (societal) factors that contributed to her overwhelming sense of frustration within the classroom. Throughout her interviews, Eve spoke of high standards of academic success that motivated her to work hard. Unlike other traditional-aged college students who are content with passing their courses, Eve sought a deeper level of understanding from her instructors and her classes.

I worked [at an elite prestigious university] over the summer. I know what I am doing, and I don’t like rushing doing anything science or experiment related because that is how I have been taught, like you don’t rush through things. You take your time to analyze this and to do this particular experiment and understand why you’re doing it rather than rushing through it.

Eve even mentioned how her history professor commented to her track coach, “I have never met a student who was genuinely interested in learning. She comes to my office hours with prepared questions from the reading, always ready to engage in discussion.” Eve’s hard work and commitment to academic excellence stems from a desire to succeed and give back to her community, “I don’t care about being this great person in the world.
What I care about is getting my education and helping to bring that education to other people in my community.” On the other hand, Eve’s commitment to academic excellence also stems from a deep internal fear of failure.

Shortly after beginning classes at Noel College, Eve realized she suffered from test anxiety. “I studied my butt off, always studying, always studying the problem, I didn’t realize I had test anxiety at the time, and it really started here, partly because I am a first-generation college student, partly because I am Black… I understand the material just fine, it’s just when I get to the test, I freeze up.” Accepting this fact, Eve was determined to do well in all her courses. She met with her instructors and worked out an action plan to take test/quizzes. She studied extra hours and joined study groups to ensure that she knew the material well enough to pass the exams. Eve acknowledged that Noel College’s competitive academic environment and the privilege that White women manifested in class also contributed to her frustration.

For Eve, it was not the academic rigor of the courses that disturbed her, but the behavior of her peers within the classroom.

When I got to class I often felt as though I was competing with not just her [her roommate], but other people in my class because in lab when we talk about things and if one girl was wrong and she so happened to be White, and I was right, she would look at me like, “Ugh [Eve makes a shocked facial expression], like what? I can’t say the right answers?” And it was frustrating, especially when I would start to talk about some things and they were like, “No, that is not right,” and then the professor would be like, “Yeh, it is.” So, it’s kind of frustrating.

Eve referred to a number of instances that disturbed her. For example, Eve’s peers seemed always to inquiry about her grades.

She [a student in her class] was constantly trying to figure out where I was in finishing the study guide. “You know, have you gotten here? Are you here yet? What are you doing? How are you answering the questions?” And then when we
would get to the quizzes or the exams some people would say, “How much did you study?”

This line of questioning irritated Eve because she believed it stemmed from the privilege and sense of entitlement that many Noel College students possessed. “They need to know, what they want to know, when they want it.” While referring to an incident within her lab group, Eve candidly admitted that she rarely had White friends because of their inability to recognize their own privilege.

According to Eve, most of the students at Noel College have always been at the top of their class, and so a lot of them have never experienced rejection. Moreover, many have never had to interact with a person of color, so for Eve this combination (of experiencing rejection and interacting with people of color) makes many White women feel intimidated.

They don’t even understand the amount of privilege that they have and where they come from, and so they look at you mostly because they have never had to interact with a Black person before, and they are just like, “Wait a minute, hold on, you are stepping into my territory, so if I feel intimidated by you I am going to tell you that you are wrong,” and I have noticed that a lot in my classes.

Although Eve’s exceptional communication skills were evident when she spoke, there appeared to be an element of reservation in her willingness to share her ideas, especially during class discussion, where she was constantly interrupted by her peers. “I am not comfortable speaking up in class because I always had people telling me, ‘Oh, wait. That is not right’” Student’s body language/non-verbal cues and people’s reactions towards her comments in class have also created an uneasy classroom environment for Eve.

I talked a lot in my English class because I liked it, and a lot of times girls would be all bright eyed when they were talking about something or when someone else was talking. They would always look at them, and when I would say something, they would look at me, and I would see how their shoulders would drop. They would put their hands in their face or something like that or their eyes would lose
all the luster that it had or if I am in a science class and I am asking a question, people would look at me and are like, “Ok, where are you going with this?” And then when I actually said something and asked a question that a professor liked and I saw the professor, from the corner of my eye, I can still see these people looking at me … It’s definitely an eye opener because they [White peers] don’t think that a lot of women of color on our campus know as much as they do, when in fact most of us know just as much or more than they do, and a lot of this behavior happens in lab.

What is evident from Eve’s formal classroom experience is that the social interactions with her White peers in the classroom greatly influenced her level of verbal participation in the classroom. Although her academic classroom experience was simultaneously rewarding (as she learned from her instructors and classmates, engaged in dialogue, and contributed to discussions), the classroom environment of Noel College forced her also to wrestle with her racialized perception of being a Black woman in the sciences at Noel College.

An Anomaly: A Black Woman in Science

For the first time in her academic trajectory, Eve found herself wrestling with stereotype threat. Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of conforming to a negative stereotype about one’s group (racial, gender etc.) According to Steele, “culturally shaped stereotypes suggesting poor performance can, when made salient in a context involving the stereotype, disrupt performance of an individual who identifies with that group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Although Eve’s coeducational high school experience prepared her for the academic rigors of Noel College, the collegiate classroom environment revealed a fear of fulfilling negative stereotypes of Black women.

At this age 20, at my age right now, I am supposed to have about 3 to 5 kids. A boyfriend that is in jail, well my dad was on drugs and my momma is half crazy
too, but the kids and the boyfriend part, that is supposed to happen, and that hasn’t happened now.

Considering her upbringing, Eve continued to be in awe with her accomplishments. She realized she could have easily fallen victim to drug abuse and violence. Although she was grateful for the opportunities afforded to her, a part of her felt like an imposter that did not belong at Noel College. This sense of being the other and not belonging is what Suinn (2006) refers to as imposter syndrome. “The stress caused by self-doubt as the ethnic student realizes his or her own minority status…many begin to question whether they belong in the academic environment” (p. 161). Taking these factors into account, Eve wrestled with the possibility of confirming stereotypes existing about Black women in the academy.

Being a Black woman in the sciences created a different set of dynamics for Eve. For the first time, Eve was concerned with how she presented herself and articulated in class. She found that she constantly had to prove herself to others. Although she was empowered when she spoke and contributed to class discussions, her peers and faculty members’ impressions of her influenced her participation levels in class.

Understanding Eve’s Academic Voice:
Self-Perception vs. What Others Think/External Perception

To understand Eve’s reasons for participating and voicing her perspectives in class, one must understand that Eve’s academic voice is a result of a complex, contentious struggle between how she perceives herself as a Black female student and how she believes her peers and faculty members perceive her. In the classroom, Eve is constantly aware of what she says and how she says things. She realized her inability to
communicate or voice her perspectives in the classroom could potentially be perceived by peers and faculty members as being unprepared or ignorant, not knowing the material. Eve admits that she only verbally expresses her thoughts and opinions when she is familiar with the academic material being discussed. “Far too often students take up space and speak without making any sense to fulfill the participation requirements, I get so upset, if you don’t have anything important to say, don’t open your mouth.” As such, when Eve participated/voiced her opinion in class, she did so to stimulate discussion, to refute a particular perspective, and/or to provide meaningful contributions to the discussion. If she is not familiar with the material being discussed she does not verbally participate. Instead, she employed non-verbal cues/behaviors of participation, such as making eye contact with the professor, having her book open (with highlighted areas to show the professors and her peers she has done the reading), and asking questions. All of these factors contributed to classroom participation and engagement for Eve.

In our second interview when asked why she participates in class discussions, Eve enthusiastically answered, “I talk and participate a lot when I like the class,… when I am excited about an experiment, and the professor encourages me to keep speaking about my thoughts… You gain the respect and admiration of your professors. You provide different perspectives and the participation grade is important.” As Eve mentioned, there are a number of reasons why she participates. But despite her confidence within the collegiate classroom, Eve experienced a visceral reaction to the racialized perceptions peers/faculty held of her.

Eve’s fear of potentially fulfilling negative stereotypes was at the center of her thought process in virtually every class (especially in courses that focused on racial
issues). Instead of paying attention to the material being discussed, in many of her classes, Eve found herself grappling with how she should articulate her question, which at times distracted her from the academic discussion at hand.

Sometimes I get really nervous, and I can literally feel myself shaking, and other times I just say, “Forget it.” If I continue to participate based off of what these people think I might say or like, even if they say that I am wrong, I don’t really care because I have gotten to the point now that if I don’t speak up or if I don’t say how I feel then I am only slighting myself. When they go back to their rooms or when they say or do their homework they’re not thinking about me. So why should I care about their reaction. I am definitely getting out of that now, especially because it’s not that much time left, and I have too much to do for myself than to worry about what other people may think or may say, and it’s definitely had a lot to do with my background.

As to not allow herself to be stigmatized by the racialized perceptions of her peers and feelings of inadequacy that she often felt in class, Eve realized participating in class was also essential to her learning process and sense of self-efficacy.

If you are actually participating in class and providing a different perspective you make your classroom experience so much more rewarding and not only does it help you, but it helps the professor, especially to bring another perspective into the classroom. Whether they want to admit it or not, it helps the students too, and I really do think also that just having a voice in class really helps you to realize how much you actually know.

The aforementioned quotes speak to the complexity existing for Eve with regard to participation and voicing her perspectives during class discussions. Within the collegiate classroom setting, participation also empowered Eve.

Not only do you get the respect and admiration from your professors…but you can provide a different experience which makes the class so much more rewarding, and you realize how much you know and learned in class…when dealing with the academic setting, it’s very important to have a voice, and it’s important to make sure that voice is heard.

However, as Eve’s experience illustrates, participating and expressing her academic voice has caused her much anxiety and frustration in some classrooms. It is not so much that
she relied on what other people thought about her in constructing her opinions and participating, although this was a major factor impacting her voice, participating for Eve was also a risk. As one of the few Black women in her science classes, verbally participating/voicing her perspective also had the ability to silence Eve.

Eve’s Silence

Regardless of Eve’s academic competency and communicative abilities, silence seemed to be a frequent rather than random occurrence within the classroom. Although Eve admits that her level of participation “varies from context to context,” her collegiate classroom experience demonstrates how verbal participation and silence function as a continuum. The collegiate classroom, which functions as a space for learning and understanding also created a silencing effect for Eve.

Earlier on in the interview process, Eve was limited in her understanding of the factors impacting her silence in the classroom, but as she continued to refer to her collegiate experiences, she realized that there were moments when she employed silence differently. Silence was often a process of knowledge acquisition through listening.

Sometimes I like to just listen in class and really see what other people have to say and to really like take the time to say, “Oh, I really didn’t think about it that way,” and that actually helps me to formulate my answer to think about things.

Boredom within the class and lack of interest in the subject matter also contributed to Eve’s silence. Another factor that Eve discussed in depth was faculty-student interaction and rejection, or as Eve puts it, “being shot down by your professors.”

Other times when I have said something my professor would like, for example, my science lab, my biology lab, I would try to talk and try to say things and then she was like, “No, that is wrong, anybody else?” but I am like, “Hell, I am speaking up. I am trying to help. Nobody else is talking,” and then someone else
will mumble something, and she is like, “Oh, oh, ok, keep going, keep going.”. What? You just told me that I was wrong, and then you move on to someone else and you’re like ok [thoughts about the instructor’s actions] it’s like babying them [White students] or like walking them along something. As with me, you are just direct and say, “No.” So I am like, “What the hell am I saying anything for then?” I am not comfortable speaking in class because I always had people telling me, “Oh wait. That is not right.”

The instructional mode of the faculty and Eve’s interaction with faculty members coupled with her fear of rejection within the classroom has created a silencing effect for Eve.

According to Eve, this silence is most prevalent with “White male professors.”

I don’t do well with males, one because when I came here the male professors also have this, it seems like a sexist view to me. Sometimes, because on the one hand they are like, “I know what I am doing, I know what I am talking about,” and if you think of something differently, they don’t always acknowledge it and they are like, “Ok, great, someone else wants to go?” and it’s like they don’t even process what you say. It’s like it rolls off the back of their necks or something… It’s like, “I am still right. That is an ok answer, but it’s not what I would have said.”

Just the idea of being shot down or rejected in public is precisely why voice/verbal participation is a risk for Eve. It would be a fallacy to suggest that her entire collegiate interaction with professors has created a silencing effect for Eve. In fact, Eve stated that one particular professor encouraged her to voice her perspectives by validating and recognizing her contributions during class discussions.

“Eve and I went over the readings, and Eve and I did this, and Eve noticed this, and what do you all think?” … I would try to give other people the chance to answer and she was like, “Eve, yes you, you know the answer… so go ahead” and I was like, “Ok,” and I went ahead, and that was really helpful for me, and it’s not like she was picking on me, but she knew I knew the answer, so she welcomed me to talk…that just made it that much more exciting for me. I think that is very helpful going to your professors and telling them, “Look, I am shy, I get nervous, and really just being honest with them, like I need your help to help me participate in this class.

Eve’s relationship with some of her professors has developed into a mutual beneficial learning relationship, where the instructor encourages her to participate to stimulate
discussion, and she in turn becomes more comfortable and willing to participate, instead of remaining silent.

In her personal life, Eve concedes that when it comes to communicating with others, especially when the topic is controversial, she often chooses to remain silent and listen, but Eve also discussed her use of silence as a tool of communication.

In my history class when this girl was talking about the book, *Young, Gifted and Black*, and she was so excited because she thought she understood poverty… and I was like, “You know what? I am just going to be quiet because you don’t make any sense right now, and I am not about to be that girl or that Black girl, that is just like, ‘Oh no my family is on food stamps or I know somebody that,… NO!’ It’s like I need to show you something and I don’t always have to tell you something about myself. Take the initiative for yourself to find out.”

The difficulty with employing silence as a form of communication, or as Eve says, “to get your point across” is that the instructor does not know that you’re employing silence to convey a message. “You have to have a special relationship with the instructor for them to be aware of your tactics.” Characterizing herself as someone who is shy but has always been vocal, Eve admits that she never thought about her silence within the formal classroom setting, but her experience gives credence to the emergent theme that her silence is caused by a two of factors: classroom related communication dynamics (fear of rejection from professors and peers, fear of being wrong, fear of what others think, knowledge acquisition, boredom of material) that manifest themselves within the formal classroom setting and racial perception of being a Black woman in the sciences.

Eve’s Academic Experience: A Revelation

Initially being at Noel College was difficult for Eve, but she realized, “This is my own experience and this is my own world, and I have to make it what I want it to be.”
Making the best of her academic experience, Eve referred to her tenure at Noel College as a revelation. “My academic experience is basically kind of like a revelation for me in just trying to really see where this is going to take me, and not only am I learning skills for the classroom, but I am learning skills of how to interact with people.”

As a microcosm of the larger society, Noel College has often represented a dichotomous environment for Eve. Although Noel College is a place where Eve has acquired the necessary academic skills to succeed in her studies, it has also been a place where Eve learned to be critical of race and how it functions.

I had already gotten used to differentiating White people in high school, but here it’s about really kind of getting to see how they work…half of the people here haven’t even been around Black people. [Being here] you learn something different about White people every day and I learn something about myself every day. Whether its realizing that they are intimidated by you or realizing that some of them are in awe of you, but won’t tell you to your face.

Part of Eve’s consciousness around race in academia was learned early in her collegiate experience. During the summer of her sophomore year, Eve engaged in summer research with a Black female scientist at one of the Ivy League institutions in the Northeast. According to Eve, Dr. Brown not only taught her how to conduct scientific research, but she was the person who initiated Eve’s socialization process as young female scientist. Dr. Brown socialized Eve in the do’s and don’ts for Black women in academia, what to do, how to dress. Moreover, Eve was taught how to behave and how to interact with White peers and faculty members in academia.

Professor Brown was a very tough, strict lady. You could not do anything wrong in her eyes, and she was my friend’s mentor, and she told us both, “You have to have everything on point. You have to present yourself well. Whether it is the way you dress or the way you speak. You can’t come out of your room in your pajamas and go to class. You cannot have your hair not done. You have to at least stick it back in a neat ponytail and add your clip on hair pieces or something, but you cannot go out looking like any old thing…” [Eve went on to explain why
Professor Brown was so strict] The reason why I am so strict is because when I was in graduate school I had an experiment going. This white boy came and undid my electrodes.” Because she was running a chemical gradient to test cells and he unplugged everything and he said [to Professor Brown], “No nigger is going to get ahead of me,” and after that she said, “You know I need to do everything in this world to get by and get past them.”

This experience not only solidified Eve’s determination to succeed in the sciences, but she learned behaviors that taught her how to survive as a Black woman in academia.

Another point that Eve stressed was the need to mentor younger female students.

The Black feminist perspective of “we build as we climb” was central to Eve’s academic experience. This philosophy stems from the idea that as individuals of color progress in various areas of academia, they give back to their community, resulting in the improvement (the lifting) of their community/community members.

My academic experience here not only will help me to grow, but it’s going to help someone else especially the first years that come after me. And I don’t care if you are Black, White, Puerto Rican, Asian, whatever, you need someone to tell you, “You can do it!” You need someone to give you motivation, and if it means for me to be vulnerable and open, then that is what I am willing to do to help someone who is coming after me…I am just really ready to be a role model to other people. I don’t care about leaving a legacy. I don’t care about being this great person in the world. What I care about is getting my education and helping to bring that education to other people.

Clearly, attending Noel College has provided Eve with an awareness and level of consciousness around race and racial perception that did not exist prior to her attendance.

Being at Noel College has also prepared Eve for some of the difficulties she will encounter as she continues to pursue her graduate degrees in the sciences.

Dalis

Upon meeting Dalis, one would never suspect that within this petit frame lies a fighter with a dynamic spirit for social justice. As an advocate and community organizer
for poor Black and Latino urban communities, Dalis learned earlier in life that knowing how to make use of her voice was essential to achieving her career and academic goals.

Family Commitment and Values

In a rural town of Puerto Rico or as Dalis says, en la montaña de Puerto Rico (in the mountains of Puerto Rico), she was born and raised by her parents and her maternal extended family. “Abuelos [grandparents] and my great uncles, who took care of me and took me to school every day, lived with me and helped raise me.” From a very young age Dalis recalled being raised with a racial awareness. “I grew up knowing that I was of my mother, who was a Black portorriqueña, and of my father who was a White portorriqueño. There was a lot of tension in our family…because there is the racism of Black and White people in Puerto Rico.” This racial awareness (which will be described later) was the basis of her work as a community advocate/organizer that eventually stimulated a desire for higher education within Dalis. While in Puerto Rico, Dalis recalled being part of a family network that assisted and provided for each other. Upon the death of Dalis’s maternal grandmother, the extended family structure began to deteriorate. “After my grandma died, my father was contracted to play in the city, so you know Salsa and Merengue en la ciudad [in the city], and he was a musician. So my father got the idea that it would be better for us to move to the United States, and we did.” From rural Puerto Rico to the northeastern United States, Dalis began her intricate educational journey.
From Puerto Rico to the United States: Social Identity and Secondary Education

While in the United States, Dalis and her family moved from one large city in the northeast to a much smaller urban community in the same region. Although Dalis acknowledged that the move to the United States was beneficial to the family, the relocation created financial hardships.

We ended up in poor neighborhoods, urban neighborhoods, and so it was a big shift from rural Puerto Rico to urban cities, and not having money and needing to find other ways to make money because now they [her parents] did not speak the language, and it was a hard upbringing...I am not quite sure, my father was an alcoholic, and he was a beautiful musician...but he didn’t speak English either, and mom stopped working when she came here. She could not find a job, and there was a lot of family stuff. They relied a lot on me.

Settling in a poor, working-class community with her parents who spoke little to no English, Dalis became the family’s financial provider. Dalis had no choice but to grow up faster than other children her age. Although she was legally unable to work at the age of 14, while in high school, Dalis held up to two jobs to help support her family.

I got up at 4:30 in the morning, worked in this expressmart on Farmington Ave., where I got held up at gunpoint. We [were] held up seriously once a month... Anyway that was me working when I was 14. I would be there at 5:30AM, and I would leave at 7:45AM go to school, come back at 2:30PM and work until 6:30PM in this little mart. That would be from Monday-Thursday and from Friday-Sunday I would work at the mall...but I worked. It was just a crazy time because I wanted to help my parents... My father worked hard as well with his music and that subsidized a lot. I was never in need, but I had to contribute to my family.

Like many children from immigrant families, being able financially to provide for her family was central to their economic stability. However, following the death of her father, with her mother still to care for, Dalis seriously began contemplating her future.

Reflecting on her surrounding community, Dalis realized the only way to escape “the
system of oppression that kept Puerto Ricans and Blacks in a state of institutional disparities” was by getting an education.

Education was not necessarily an expectation from my parents, it was a value. It was part of our value system, our familial value system…I knew that someday I would become educated, and yes, the connection of bettering my family because education was there.

Although Dalis later described the hardships she encountered in high school, receiving an education symbolized a sense of achievement and reverence from her family. Being educated meant an improvement in the quality of life, but like many of the working-class poor in her community, Dalis was caught in a cyclic system of institutional oppression that impacted her educational development and career choices. Dalis noted that poverty and lack of educational access existing in her community was generational.

My friend’s parents had young parents. They grew up here too. They were in this system of oppression. Already, that I could see, [thinking] it was just weird. I just realized, a lot of people are not getting out of this [system of oppression, poverty], so I kind of felt that I am not going to make it any worst if I get involved in bad things. I just make the status quo, and if I can graduate high school, at least I have a diploma from high school. Then I can get a job and work more, than we can get a little ahead.

With facial expressions that clearly convey what she is thinking, Dalis appeared to relive a difficult moment in her life. As she reflected on her high school educational experiences, Dalis discussed her impressionable years and the internal struggles to be educated without repudiating her own Puerto Rican cultural heritage.

For them [the White teachers] I was just another stereotype, another Puerto Rican girl that didn’t speak English well, that didn’t sound right. I spoke too ghetto…I was caught in the achievement gap. I was labeled remedial, and I couldn’t possibly go to college right away because they wouldn’t accept me… you know, I was among other people that were the same level. Our high school was not a very good high school. They [the white teachers] considered us under achievers. So that stigma was there. I think that is why my girlfriends and I did not put our all into work. I disassociated myself from things when I didn’t understand them. Let’s say a math problem, as oppose to asking for help or taking on the challenge, I kind of pushed it away and almost put it out of my mind. We could all identify
with getting bad grades, but inside I always wondered why I couldn’t try harder, but I was scared of it [getting an education, being smart], I was really scared of it.

Dalis angrily admitted that she was stripped of receiving a proper education because of her teachers’ negative stereotypes of Black and Puerto Rican students. The reputation of the school and lack of resources also contributed to the underperformance of students. Dalis believed that her inability to speak English well, ultimately led some of her teachers’ to label her as an underachiever. The overwhelming sense of insignificance that Dalis felt caused her to disconnect from her education. In fact, Dalis’s high school experience speaks to the struggles that many multi-racial, poor, working-class students encounter as they attempt to navigate through the educational system. Nowhere was this internal struggle for education and identity more evident than in Dalis’s description of the significance of English and Spanish in her life.

**English vs. Spanish:**

*Academic Language vs. Emotional Language*

The ability to speak two languages was central to the development of Dalis’s cultural identity and sense of self.

I used to admire people who I thought were intelligent, and I equated it [the English language] to reading, but I couldn’t read a lot because I didn’t learn English early enough to know all the vocabulary. I had this thing, that I wanted to be intelligent, and the other side was that I was struggling a lot in school. So there was this thing, I really wanted to exemplify what intelligence was, so I looked for it, I yearned for it. I heard how people spoke in English and how I liked it, but I always spoke Spanish, and I made sure that I spoke Spanish always too. It was my emotional language, so I felt I needed to do that.

Knowing how to speak and voice her perspectives in English was imperative to Dalis’s academic progress in the classroom. Speaking English was central to Dalis’s learning and educational development. Her inability to speak English fluently caused her to question
her academic competency and doubt her intelligence. As such, one can speculate that 
English was a symbol/reminder to Dalis of her own academic underperformance. On the 
flip side, Dalis’s commitment to speaking Spanish, her “emotional language,” gave her a 
sense of empowerment and belonging. Whereas English functioned as the public 
language (the language she was forced to converse in and understand educational 
materials), Spanish was the language of her culture. Spanish was the private language 
Dalis spoke at home with family, with friends and community members. She spoke 
Spanish with individuals she had an emotional and meaningful connection with (family, 
friends, neighborhood elders, etc.). Spanish was not only a means by which Dalis 
remained rooted in her culture and ethno-racial identity; speaking Spanglish (a 
combination of English and Spanish) became a tool by which she changed her life and 
empowered others through advocacy.

Social Justice and Community Organizing: 
Pathway to Higher Education

After graduating from high school, Dalis participated in a one-year pilot study 
with a private liberal arts college for women in the northeast. This study sought to 
examine the experiences of urban Latina girls who were not enrolled in college. While 
participating in this study, Dalis took college level courses and engaged in dialogue with 
undergraduate students. This experience rekindled in her a desire to fulfill her goal of 
furthering her education. “I don’t know, it was kind of a good thing that happened. It fed 
that thing of being in the classroom, of being able to be intelligent… and then I wanted to 
go to school, [but] I had to go through the process of applying and then financial aid and 
then money, and I just didn’t go back.” Unable to pay for a college education, Dalis met
with a representative of a non-profit, community organization to secure a meaningful job. “I said, ‘I need a job, but I don’t want to work in a restaurant, and I don’t want to work at the store in the mall, you know, I really want to work for the community. I really want to make a difference, but I value my education.’” The pressing need to financially assist her mother and her aspiration to learn and expand her knowledge base landed Dalis her first professional job at the age of 18 as a substance abuse prevention counselor. Within 3½ years, Dalis became the Assistant Director of the Juvenile Urban Research Institute within the same non-profit, community organization (later to become Director).

During this time, Dalis made sufficient money to financially assist her mother, to purchase a car, and to save. As Assistant Director, Dalis traveled to conferences/workshops, advocated for her constituencies, wrote grants, and received funding for community programs. These accomplishments led Dalis’s supervisor to inquire about her pursuing a higher education.

“Dalis, why aren’t you in school? You should be doing this in school,” and I was like, “No… I don’t know.” Then I learned about a program for non-traditional students at Noel College, and I applied. One of the women at Noel College was like, “You need to be here. We want you here,” and everything turned around.

Although Dalis’s educational trajectory was not free from hardships (the educational system failing her, the lack of encouragement, guidance, educational support received from teachers), her experience speaks to alternative pathways to higher education and acquiring a college degree.

Noel College: A Bitter Sweet Experience

As a non-traditional student majoring in Educational Psychology, Dalis overcame a number of obstacles to receive her college education. Her pathway to acquiring a
bachelor’s degree from Noel College was by no means a simple one, but as a senior completing her last year, Dalis was in a unique position to reflect on her educational experience, highlighting not only the intellectual, but the emotional and spiritual toll of attending a predominantly White institution.

Having resigned from a salaried administrative Director’s position to pursue her bachelor’s degree, Dalis expressed feeling inadequate in college.

In the beginning, I felt I didn’t belong. Professionally I was on. I was always together. I knew what to say. I was for the people. I had my own mission within the organization…So if I had people that I was working for that was enough to fill me. I would stand up to anyone, and I grew professionally… When I came to Noel, it was literally, at first it felt like no one knew me, and no one cared what my background was. But it was important to me because that is what got me here. My professional experience was my foundation by which I became an adult.

Unlike many traditional undergraduate students who develop their professional skills while in college or after graduation, Dalis entered Noel College having an established professional identity. As an employed professional, Dalis advocated for the constituencies of her community in various social institutions (i.e., court, schools, etc.).

She wrote grants and devised afterschool programs for the youth of her community.

Although committed to her community and her job, Dalis realized that obtaining a college degree was necessary to further her professional and academic growth. However, upon her arrival at Noel College, Dalis’s professional identity became less important as she struggle to develop her academic skills to navigate the environment of Noel College.

So I came to Noel College, and it was totally different. Like a new breed of people that I had not known and people of color who were professors… so I said this is academia. Academia is totally different… I wasn’t exposed to this…I felt inadequate in the classroom, in terms of interacting with other students. At first, I felt like you know these girls were right on always. It appeared that they were right on, and they knew what everything was about. They had the background the physical science classes, and they were right on with statistics. They were right on because they had taken it in high school, and I can’t even tell you the subjects I
took in high school because I don’t remember and not because I am older, but the quality [the lack] of education I received.

Her inadequate educational preparation made her transition to college challenging. Having a limited academic background with little to no college preparatory or advanced courses led Dalis to question her abilities and whether she belonged in college. This academic self-doubt, that comes with an awareness of being the minority in the class and/or academically substandard, is what psychologist Suinn (2006) calls imposter syndrome. Experiencing imposter syndrome and being in a new academically rigorous environment created much anxiety for Dalis, which impacted her level of participation and interaction in the classroom.

Being Raw: Clashes and Confrontations in the College Classroom

Dalis’s high GPA and academic honors confirmed her commitment to her studies and learning. Nevertheless, the prejudice and ignorance of some of her classmates and professors was a constant rather than a peripheral factor within the classroom at Noel College. When asked to reflect on her collegiate classroom experiences, Dalis described a clash of cultures.

“Within the classroom [at Noel College], an academic culture [existed] that sought to understand and dissect everything without necessarily taking differences and different experiences into account.” According to Dalis, in certain classes there was no room for the integration of the personal and academics in class discussions. This disconnect with the personal and academic caused Dalis to experience moral and ethical conflicts in some of her classes. For example, in classes where Dalis studied and
researched people of color in poor urban communities, she struggled as a researcher not
to perpetuate the parasitic relationship (where researchers gather and take information
from subjects without providing information and or contributing to the community) that
is common among some researchers. As the only woman of color within her classes often
(in classes that attempted to integrate course materials with the lived experiences of
students) Dalis felt like a guinea pig being scrutinized and questioned about her
experience. Because of these aforementioned experiences, the classroom functioned as a
double edge sword for Dalis. It functioned as a space for learning and contestation.

Unwilling to allow others to speak for her or about the communities she so closely
worked with, Dalis experienced a number of clashes and confrontations with peers and
professors in the classroom.

In the beginning, the first weeks of my first semester of classes, I was intriguing
to them [students and faculty]. I was intriguing because I was RAW. The
professor said to me directly, “You know you were, since you were formerly
poor,” and it was a politics class and because I was so raw, I said, “What? Why?
Well, clearly you are at Noel College and you know this is a different level of
privilege.” I raised my hands and I said, who are you to say that I was poor and I
am not, or who are you to [didn’t continue thought], and I was raw. I said, “You
don’t know me! The problem with this school is that they already think they know
who I am and you don’t know who I am, and I am sick and tired of it.” And the
girls in the classroom were like, “Wow!” Because we were talking about being
poor and the poor community and [the word] ghetto was being thrown around like
nothing and “I am so sick and tired of you talking about the ghetto. Let me
fucking tell you what the ghetto is, what welfare is,” and I just went off. And my
professor looked at me, and he said, “Tell us, Dalis” and I said, “No, I am not
going to be your guinea pig right now. You are not going to use my examples…I
am not going to give these women any kind of information about me, I know who
I am.” [After class] I called my girlfriend and I said to her, “I can’t be here! I
can’t believe I did this [her rawness in the class]. This is not good for me. They
don’t know who I am. I don’t belong here,” and it was so messed up because I felt
so overwhelmed.

The aforementioned experience was a frequent occurrence in Dalis’s earlier academic
career at Noel College. This “rawness” that Dalis described can be understood as a form
of communication triggered by the lack of diversity in classroom, her peers’ ignorance with respect to living conditions of the urban poor and the stereotypical assumptions made by peers and faculty members.

Being raw or rawness was Dalis’s way of being brutally honest with her peers and/or faculty members with respect to the subject matter being discussed in class. When Dalis was “raw” in the classroom, she spoke from lived experience that involved no code switching (“moving between variations of languages in different context” [Learn NC, n.d.]), no filtering of words, or modifying her speech or behavior. Dalis spoke in the vernacular language of her people/community (slang) to “call people out, “expose her peers and/or faculty for their ignorance, bigotry, or privilege around a particular topic and/or issue being discussed. The challenge Dalis faced with being “raw” in the classroom was that her message or the point she was trying to convey could potentially be rendered insignificant and/or irrational because of her emotional involvement with the topic. Many of her peers were also turned off by her direct retort, resulting from their lack of understanding.

Dalis’s ability to be outspoken, courageous, and provide a different perspective that challenged students and faculty members led her to engage in a number of clashes and confrontations in the classroom. Dalis admitted, “I am not as ‘raw’ anymore, like I was at the beginning.” While at Noel College, Dalis had to learn how to engage and interact with students and faculty, employing different communication tactics within the classroom.

Realizing that being raw with peers and faculty members might not be the best approach to generate dialogue (because she unintentionally alienated many students)
Dalís became cautious of what she said and how she conveyed her perspectives in classroom discussions. Although Dalís had employed the use of English and Spanish in her role as a community advocate and organizer (to get the necessary resources for her constituencies), in the classroom Dalís was required to modify her speech/language and interactional behaviors so as not to fulfill existing stereotypes about Latina women as affirmative action recipients, unqualified to be in college, welfare mothers. In some of her classes, Dalís was forced to reject her unique form of linguistic expression (her rawness) to adopt standard English (English language that is normative to educated native speakers) to engage in academic discourse. “My rawness, I don’t find it now, and I think that I miss it sometimes.” In the collegiate setting, Dalís’s rawness seemed to be a marker of her otherness, her Puerto Ricaness, her urban upbringing. In abandoning her rawness, it seemed as though Dalís lost a part of her cultural identity and self-expression as a Puerto Rican woman in the academic classroom.

Despite the value in knowing how to engage and utilize academic discourse as a survival mechanism within the classroom, Dalís continued to challenge faculty members on a number of topics. “I have been a constant [a reminder] to Professors in class, like hey, remember what you are saying or like if a professor says something, I am the one that always says, “Bring a different perspective.” So I call myself the different perspective person, like, “Hey, what about thinking about this?” Forcing instructors and students to think outside the box on topics was not an easy task for Dalís. Dalís’s willingness to voice her perspectives in classroom discussions seemed to be an intentional process to challenge and undo the stereotypes existing about Latina women in academia.
Participation in the Collegiate Classroom:
Risk and Responsibility

The college classroom has always been a place of contradiction for students of color/women of color. Although the classroom environment functions as a space to learn, express diverse points of views and engage in dialogue, it also functions as a place that invoked physical and emotional responses for Dalis. In virtually every class that Dalis attended, the fact that she was the only woman of color was a constant factor. As such, it was “risky” to participate in classroom discussions because Dalis automatically became the center of attention when she spoke.

Dalis candidly admitted that it was a psychological and an emotional endeavor to participate in class discussions. Although Dalis recognized the value in sharing her point of view, when she spoke, she also had the responsibility of screening her verbal and physical reactions/behavior so as not to “fulfill stereotypes.” This is precisely why Dalis had to curtail her rawness in class discussions. These factors forced Dalis to become overly critical.

You start to feel like you are shutting down and you say nothing because, *yo no quiere decir lo que no es* [I don’t want to say something that is wrong]. So you start protecting [manifesting] that stereotype, right? I don’t want people to think that I am not this and I am not that [within the classroom]. Whatever it is you start internalizing.

In addition to this, Dalis realized that her peers’ and faculty’s perception of her intelligence impacted her ability to provide her standpoint in class.

People were looking at me and what came out of my mouth [paused] it wasn’t really what I wanted, or how I wanted it to come out, like it just made me disbalanced [unbalanced]. It made me lose myself. So I knew that I sounded a little shaky. I know that I sounded umm [pause to think] unsure in what I was saying. I don’t know, maybe I didn’t, but I felt like I didn’t sound intelligent, especially in an academic space. I just felt like I was [paused]. It is the stereotype threat. So I became the thing that I knew I was being stereotyped with. I became
the thing I didn’t want to become… and so I felt someone was going to blow up my spot [disclose who she really was] and was going to say, “Oh, you don’t belong here.” So then there were those fears that would come up.

Navigating through the web of external racial perceptions her peers and faculty members may have of her and dealing with her own internal processes and insecurities, Dalis still managed to contribute to class discussion by connecting the materials discussed with her passion and life experiences. “I always find a way to connect it, and I knew that I did that”. Although, Dalis acknowledged that the presence of women of color in the classroom helped her contribute to the discussion, the collegiate classroom at Noel College also led Dalis to experience multi-dimensional forms of silence.

Silence: A Conscious Choice with Multiple Meanings/Reactions

Dalis’s reflection on experiencing silence within the collegiate classroom was implicitly discussed as a temporal and spatial manifestation whose meaning varied with her academic development as a student. According to Dalis, her inability to understand the material discussed in class and/or her process of learning and listening to others resulted in her silence. However, for the first two years, when she did not participate or share her perspectives in discussions, it was due to her insecurities and potentially fulfilling stereotypes existing of Latina women/women of color.

I felt I was scared to be confronted with not being intelligent or being looked down upon or fulfilling a stereotype of all my people. So it was a lot of responsibility or I was pissed off [in some classes] that I could not even blink because that thing was going to come out, that rawness. And that again will fulfill stereotypes.

In this case, Dalis’ silence was a deep psychological/emotional response to stereotypes existing of women of color. This silence that Dalis manifested was a direct result of her
insecurities (believing she was academically sub-standard, not having the academic discourse, not belonging, doubting herself). However, as Dalis became familiar with the academic environment of Noel College, established relationships with faculty members, became involved in supervising a community service leadership program, she became more confident in her academic abilities. She began to make Noel College her own. As such, she became more willing to take risks in challenging students and instructors in the classroom. The fact that Dalis had more confidence and self-efficacy in her academic abilities allowed her to questions students without becoming as she called it “raw” and too emotional.

During her junior and senior year Dalis’ described moments where she and some of her friends decided to purposefully remain silent during discussions about race and racism.

This is when I was more confident about me, and so I became silent in the classroom where we were talking about race and racism, and I decided that with my friend, that we were not going to talk for the next 2 days. Because they [White students] were going to talk, the groups were going to dialogue about White perspectives and people of color perspectives, and we decided we were not going to say anything and we didn’t. It was so uncomfortable for the professor. I think [we] did it one day, and I did it the next day, and we were very active participants. We were the ones possibly, the only ones sometimes, to give the perspective of the person of color and [thinking] it was really uncomfortable for the White students to not have me or her say the things [provide any perspectives/opinion, suggestions]. So what we saw was that they [White students] were looking for affirmation, or they were looking for your nod or something. White women looked at us to get approval. If we nodded they felt like they were connected or if we said, “No,” then they were like, “Why?” So we decided to kind of not speak, and we felt how uncomfortable the women in the group were… On another occasion, I remember I was silent on purpose one day, and it was just for the simple reason of just not contributing because sometimes I over contributed…so you know those were two times that I kind of did it [silence] intentionally.

The silence described here is a form of intentional self silencing that Dalis engaged in. It was more strategic as she and her friend were attempting to make a point to
their peers and instructor, regarding race. Although her peers and instructor may not have
known that Dalis and her friend were engaging in a strategic form of silence, according to
Dalis it created an uncomfortable feeling for them. As such, this act of silence was
gratifying and empowering to Dalis and her friend because they had the advantage in the
group conversations. Unlike the strategic silence, the silence that Dalis experienced
during her earlier years at Noel College resulted in the racial and classist stereotypes
some of her peers possessed about women of color and Latina women and her academic
insecurities. This form of silence was harmful and negative for Dalis. Both forms of
silence were a conscious choice. In her earlier academic career often silence in the
classroom functioned as a strategy of protection (remaining silent so as not to fulfill a
stereotype). As she became more confident in her abilities as a student, her silence
functioned as a strategy of empowerment.

Dalis’s experience speaks to the complexity of participation and silence within the
academic classroom and how both function as a continuum whose meanings vary
depending on the socio-contextual factors (class size, materials discussed, diversity
within the classroom) of the classroom and the internal processes of individuals.
Nevertheless, grappling with these issues within the collegiate classrooms of Noel
College has been what Dalis described as una bataya (a battle).

*La educación formal es una Bataya, siempre Metiendote de cuña:* Formal
Education is a Battle, Always Forcing Yourself in

As a non-traditional student who began at Noel College with an established
professional reputation (within her community), Dalis was accustomed to advocating to
acquire the necessary resources for her constituencies. During her tenure at Noel College,
Dalís understood that her education was a necessity, yet it became another space where she had to advocate and struggle.

You graduate from this college because you want to be in this college, and you will be a success when you finish, and you will go on. You need to do this! But how do I, as a mentor, say to these women [perspective women of color], this is going to be an absolutely great experience for you. You now entered another space, another level of fighting. You are going to be in this position of claiming, of defending, of making sure that people acknowledge who you really are, [as an individual] not the stereotype.

As such, Dalís felt unwelcomed at Noel College, “You feel like you are always forcing yourself in, like you don’t really want to be there. They don’t want you to be there, but you want to put yourself in there because I need to keep this [education] open.” While Dalís battled with issues in the classroom, she continued to work to improve and change the privileged environment of Noel College for future generations of women of color who intended to matriculate there. While attempting to do this, Dalís came to the realization that Noel College had changed her as well.

I have entered a process…which is this identity change. I am different, different not because education changes you…what really changes is how conditioned you are from your environment, from society, institutionally. How conditioned you are to fail or to stay in the same cycle and get into traps…Noel College doesn’t understand me. I mean come on, these schools, Yale, Harvard, I mean are you kidding…So my identity has changed. It has changed because I have become angry. I have become very angry at the reasons why I feel the way that I do and the reasons why things happen. Why I didn’t have education or education didn’t come to me in the way that it comes to other people.

This anger, which Dalís so candidly admitted, emerged from a critical consciousness (surrounding structural and psychological forms of oppressions) gained while attending Noel College. “I started learning about the concepts and theories and the deconstruction of like racism and oppression and understanding it…and how to look back at the communities where I loved and worked and see what they are talking about was true…”
Dalís also became increasingly angrier as she realized the lack of institutional commitment to increasing the number of women of color on campus.

I was just an example of the many women that could be in my position and so I started questioning, “Why? Why is it just me and a few others, you know like me, cause there were other non-traditional students, because the mission of the non-traditional program is to reach out to these untouched women who want a second chance, all these things,” but the majority of them are still White privileged and for many reasons have come to complete their bachelor degree…but there is a very small group of women that are of color.

This line of questioning, in addition to her academic abilities, is precisely what led Dalís to receive a number of academic honors (Phi Beta Kappa, etc.) upon graduation.

Although a part of her felt a sense of accomplishment, graduating from a prestigious institution like Noel, Dalís also felt a sense of loss. Receiving an education has changed the way her community sees her.

I wanted it [education] so badly and I want to continue doing it [getting more education], and I am committed to it, I am different, and it’s [having an education] changing the way my community sees me. They are happy about it, but you know how our community is. It is like, ella está entre los libros. Ella siempre está estudiando, no te preocupes, ella es diferente [she is inside her books. She is always studying, do not worry, she is different], but I am dealing with that feeling right now, with the change in identity. Because I wanted it, I wanted this education. What happens is that it’s true, knowledge is power, power is knowledge, but it is such a cliché. But it’s when you really think about it in the process that it’s most powerful. If I go somewhere with my mother, and I just don’t say anything, I am treated just like everybody else, but if I am with my mother and something goes wrong, and I say excuse me and speak, it’s different.

Dalís realized that having an education provided her with a level of social capital (privilege and access to resources) that was unavailable to her prior to attending Noel College. Despite the fact that Dalís continued to advocate for disadvantaged constituencies within her community, while away at college, there appeared to be a level of distrust from certain community members with respect to her commitment to the
communities and whether she truly had the community’s best interest as she was *diferente* because she went to college and studied so much.

Nevertheless, like many women of color who attend predominantly White institutions, Dalis took a leap of faith and left all that was known to her to acquire an education, to improve her life and that of her family and community she so passionately worked with. In acquiring this college education that she so yearned for, Dalis encountered a number of obstacles and challenges that forced her to grow as an individual and become more critical of society and social institutions. At the same time, this education forced Dalis to modify her behavior and linguistic practices so as not to offend or frighten/intimidate her White peers and faculty. Moreover, to fit into the institutionalized academic norm, she had to learn to monitor her “rawness” within the classroom while navigating and making sense of the internal doubt, fears, and insecurities she struggled with daily.

Issy

Candidly reflecting on her overall academic experience at the prestigious Noel College, Issy, a charming, but shy Mexican American from California provided poignant depictions of the benefits and hardships experienced during her educational trajectory. From the economic hardships of her family to the drug and violence that plagued her community, Issy’s determination and educational investment has always been a source of survival and escape from negative influences. Often in awe and disbelief (that she was fortunate enough to be studying at Noel College), Issy’s educational trajectory at Noel has not been without struggle.

Noel College is a place where I have really had to push hard, and you know at the end you realize, “Damn it! I am not good enough.” You feel that way, in a
prestigious institution like this. This is a high caliber place and it’s a place where these great minds are. You feel like the outsider sometimes, and that is my experience. It’s not going to be easy for me as a Latina. I have barriers I have to jump across. Some people just jump right through it and some people just blast through it. I am just going to have to really struggle.

Acknowledging that she has gained much from her educational experience at Noel College (openness, acceptance, learning to think differently about things, encouraged to think outside the box), Issy also stated, “It’s been difficult. It’s been tough. It’s been a struggle. It’s been a push. It has forced me to think about my situation as a Latina, differently… In some way this place has taught me that life is not going to get easier.” Becoming more conscious of the sociopolitical and economic factors that shaped her sense of self as a Latina and contributed to her academic struggles, Issy’s social location and her family’s lack of academic capital were two factors she frequently referred to when speaking about her academic struggles as a child and young adult.

From English to Spanish: Cultural and Linguistic Transitions

Arriving from Mexico, Issy’s parents and maternal extended family moved to a small city in southern California. Like many immigrant families, Issy’s parents worked excessively to provide for their children and the remaining family in Mexico. Most of the family that I know is from my mom’s side… She has 7 brothers and 3 sisters and they are all a pretty big family. They are the one’s I am the closest to because my dad’s family is still in Mexico. So I pretty much grew up around my uncles, aunts, my grandma, grandpa, and my mom. My parents worked a lot when I was younger so I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. I think I learned a lot of Spanish from her and also from my mother, but a lot of the times it was from my grandmother or my uncles and aunts…Grandma’s house was a place to have traditional foods and a place where I could speak Spanish, whereas in school, you know, I didn’t speak as much Spanish as I could or as much as I wanted too.

Reflecting on her childhood, Issy affectionately spoke of family gatherings with traditional foods like carne asada (grilled beef) as well as music and conversations with family in Spanish.
While she discussed these joyful moments, I also detected melancholy in her voice. Speaking of the difficulties she encountered in elementary school, Issy made reference to the loss of family tradition that accompanied the linguistic shift from Spanish to English.

I had a lot of trouble reading when I was younger… that is what my mother tells me, and I think it is because I spoke Spanish in the home, and once I started speaking English, it was a little difficult. I always had Spanish as my grounding language so it was difficult to switch or transition.

Although Issy did not lose her culture as a result of speaking more English than Spanish, she did, however, lose some of her Spanish.

I absolutely hate that my parents were not strict about always speaking Spanish in the home because once they started speaking English too, it was kind of easier for them to, well for us to speak English to them so that they learn as well. But now my Spanish is like horrible, and I hate it because it takes me forever to really…like I can speak it fluently, but it takes me a while. Like I have to think a lot, it sucks because Spanish is my first language. But now that I am older and because I have gone through schooling, which is completely in English, it’s as if English is my first language. So I have to think about it in English first, translate it, and then speak it in Spanish. So it’s difficult, and it’s frustrating because it’s like that your roots. That is how your mom spoke to you when you were a baby, like that means a lot to me and it hurts that I don’t speak it as well and feel like I wouldn’t be able to pass it on to my children if I have some in the future…It is difficult now because my parents know a lot of English, so I speak in English. They’ll understand and talk back to me in English, so there is not that urgency to speak Spanish.

Although this shift from Spanish to English was not completely accepted by Issy, her parents’ process of learning English was intricately intertwined with abandoning much of their cultural and ethnic identity to achieve greater economic and social success. Her parents were convinced that they would have more job opportunities available to them by developing a proficiency in English. Issy also realized that the essence of her Mexican culture, the Spanish language, was being lost. Nevertheless, as Issy stated, for as much English as her parents spoke, they were still unable to advocate for her and her siblings properly in school.
As devoted Apostolic Christian (a Christian denomination mostly from Mexico and Huachuca) Issy’s parents and the other parishioners were discouraged from questioning the teachings of the New Testament at their church. Males held leadership positions within the denomination while females remained submissive, especially to their fathers and eventually their husbands. Stepping outside the prescribed gender roles and gendered patterns of communication was unacceptable. Because of the socialized gendered behavior that influenced her parents, Issy and her siblings struggled to communicate with them. Her mother became even more strict with the church teaching, making it that much more difficult for Issy to discuss any school concerns.

My father had some college in Mexico. My mom barely had any schooling. But my dad [thinking] I don’t know he wasn’t, not to say that he wasn’t encouraging, but he wasn’t I guess. He didn’t know how to encourage us. And my mom tried but couldn’t really be specific because all she could say was, “mi hija [my daughter], you know you can do it.” Like you know, really general, you know. “Mi hija, go ahead and do your homework,” but there wasn’t that [thinking] they did not know how to ask how we were doing in school. They would just assume we were going to school, so are doing well. That was pretty much the assumption. And it was difficult because my brothers and I really never knew how to talk to them either. When it came to school, it got to the point that we talked to ourselves and be like, “I guess they don’t really care.” But I mean we knew they cared, but it’s like they don’t know how to talk to us because they didn’t have the schooling. So, it was kind of difficult for them to reach out and be like, “Oh well, do you need help?” Well, if we do need help there was no way for them to help us. If anything, it was the other way around. If they needed help, they’d come to us, like reading something, like a letter, etc.

As painful as it seemed for Issy to retell this experience, she realized that her parents never underwent a process of school/educational socialization in the U.S. Their parental involvement with their children’s education was limited. Parental educational involvement for Issy’s parents was cultural, insofar as it included the transmission of their cultural values (of working hard to achieve the American Dream) to their children, but it was limited due to their inability to assist
them with their academic performance. This became a major point of contention for Issy and her parents during high school and college education.

Escaping a Culture of Violence: Education as a Means of Survival

The fact that Issy and her siblings lived in a poor to working-class community, controlled by gang and drug violence, put them at an inherent disadvantage with their education.

Where we grew up was not the best place, and when I say not the best place, I mean there was a lot of violence. It’s very easy for people, for teenagers to fall into the wrong path. Either stealing or drugs and one of those teenagers was my older brother, who is currently incarcerated. Because of having that around [the violence, drugs], I think my younger brothers and I were more protected because of what my mom experienced with him [her older brother]. She felt she had to protect us more. So my younger brothers and I went to a private school, where my older brother went to a public school.

Unable to relocate her family to a safer neighborhood, Issy’s mother did the next best thing to protect her children from negative influences. Issy’s family transferred their children from the public school system to a private school. According to Issy, “We were protected from influences like, you know, there weren’t people selling drugs in the back of the gym. Like that would not happen. There was a lot of protection, but in terms of academics it wasn’t strong as I would have liked.” With respect to academic rigor and preparation, Issy mentioned that very little difference existed between the private institution and the public school she attended. Both schools failed to prepare Issy for the academic rigors she would encounter in high school and later in college. In the public school Issy learned to interact with students from various ethnoracial backgrounds with ease. It was not until she began attending a high school for gifted students that Issy realized that she was at a serious educational disadvantage.
When Issy began her high school education she admitted embarrassingly that she did not know how to write an essay. She knew that she was capable but she was not prepared to tackle the academic workload of high school.

High School was different… all my instructors were White…there were maybe two that were Asian and mostly all of them were from a prestigious university nearby. This high school was created by University X. It started out with a couple of students, and it just grew from there. Most of the teachers would come directly from the University, and then they would teach here. So it was very hard core and they were very encouraging… I think the reason for that is that most of the students were of color and the instructors knew in the back of their minds they were coming into this area where we were not being encouraged to study… I would have never thought I could go to college if it wasn’t for this high school… So it was because of my high school that I pretty much was like, “I can do this, you know, I can maybe go to college”… They [the instructors] were very encouraging. I mean from the beginning they would stay with us after class. They were dedicated to making sure that we were comfortable in the classroom.

Much of the academic difficulties Issy encountered stemmed from the lack of academic preparation received during her early education. This gradually began to change in high school with the assistance of experienced and caring teachers. “I cared about whether I did well, because they cared. I knew they were watching out for me.” For the first time in her academic career, Issy spoke about being encouraged to learn, to think critically, and to ask questions.

In the classroom, I was very involved, because I knew the teachers. I felt comfortable to ask questions and comfortable to come to them if something didn’t make sense. Also I could ask my peers…we were all very connected. If I needed anything, there was a lot of support for me to grow.

This type of environment propelled her to want to learn more and to study harder. Often, Issy remained in school to take part in study sessions, college prep courses or other afterschool programs. “In high school, I barely saw my parents, and it was because high school was so demanding.” Although her mother disapproved of staying late for afterschool programs (because she thought Issy would eventually fall prey to drugs and sex), Issy excelled in her academics. The constant bickering between her and her mother only made Issy retreat deeper
into her academics. The possibility of attending a prestigious college was made a reality for Issy in high school.

Since the beginning of freshman year, there was always discussions about college. College was being talked about, constantly. This is what you have to do to prepare for college. This is what colleges are looking for. From day one, it was college this, college that, which is why you build this confidence that you can make it here, there [in college], and succeed, despite the fact that we come from a place where there is a lot of violence and teenagers are not expected to be much.

The encouraging environment fostered by her teachers and peers provided Issy with a healthy level of confidence, but this confidence did not protect Issy from the hardships she would experience at Noel College.

Coming out of high school, where I felt like I could conquer the world and really felt like I was going to do great things because they [the teachers] make you feel that way, but they don’t tell you, because they don’t know. My teachers were all White and they didn’t know the enormous barriers I was going to have in college. I was not prepared for that. I came to here [Noel College] unprepared in terms of the struggles that I would have because I am a minority, because I am Latina, because I don’t have what most of the students here have, resources.

The Hardships and Struggles of Noel College

When Issy’s family received news of her acceptance to Noel College, it was difficult to accept.

One of my uncle’s was super excited and he was just overwhelmed and congratulated my mom. He realized how important it was and how often it is that we Latinos go to college. It just didn’t happen. I think we [Issy and eventually her brothers] were the only ones in my extended family who went to college.

Although the rest of her uncles and aunts were pleased, she said, “They didn’t realize how hard it was and how difficult it would be and the sacrifices I would have to make.” This not knowing (by her family), this lack of understanding of the academic rigors of College and the sacrifices made to achieve good grades was a constant stressor for Issy. Being the first to attend
such a prestigious institution like Noel College was exciting but caused much anxiety for Issy. “I am the first to go to college, and I do have older brothers, but I am the first from the family and my extended family to go to college and stay there and continue to pursue an education.” As a first-generation college student, Issy felt an enormous amount of responsibility to do well academically. “You know there is that pressure and stress, and it’s not like I think about it every day or I think about it when I am doing my work, but it’s there. You are here, and you are Latina, and you have to do well.” Her mother would call her once in a while to say, “Mi hija [my daughter], you can do it!” But those words of encouragement were not sufficient to get Issy through her difficult academic periods. Her parents’ lack of familiarity with the academic collegiate environment, the lack of understanding from family members/friends, and her own expectation of succeeding were a few factors that made her academic experience at Noel College more challenging. In addition to this, Issy made reference to a host of socio-contextual factors and personal insecurities that led to a difficult learning environment.

Issy enthusiastically spoke about the excitement she experienced from being in a different environment when she arrived at Noel College.

It was amazing being away from home, learning to be independent…First I thought it was amazing, I still do. You know, I was really excited. You know, I was super ready to get all A’s, and, you know, just really dominate in life because in high school I was encouraged so much that I thought that I could do this… but then I got to the classroom and my first semester was difficult.

The most prevalent institutional factor that directly impacted Issy’s academic performance was the size of the class. According to Issy, if the class size was too large (“between 50-60 students”), it was difficult to engage and participate in class discussion. On the other hand, if the classes were too small (“less than 12 students”), it created more anxiety and frustration for Issy. In both situations, Issy described feeling an insatiable need to speak, but being unable to do so.
She attributed her lack of participation/silence in the classroom to self-doubt, lack of agency, and fear of professor’s criticism.

Uncertainty Manifested Through Silence and Participation

Issy’s timidity and silence in the classroom at best could be explained by her lack of confidence and familiarity with the collegiate academic environment. As a first-generation Latina, Issy experienced a self-imposed pressure to do well academically. This ultimately created a difficult and stressful learning environment.

In class I would think about the material. Maybe I should be getting the material, but I am not. And thinking that this is my problem and I should study more…but part of it is when you know you need help, you have to get it. Go get the help, but obviously that wasn’t the case my first semester where I felt that I didn’t have the confidence to do that…I remember coming back my second semester and thinking I am going to do better. I can do better! I am going to be ok. And then again, I had the same problem. I didn’t talk to my professors. I went to class and the reading became more difficult…I was surviving through the classes. I really didn’t do as well as I could have.

Issy knew what needed to be done to improve her grades (reach out to academic support resources, meet more frequently with academic advisor, talk to someone about academic and social struggles), but her behavior and lack of agency led her towards isolation. “I think it’s just a part of feeling alone, feeling like you know, you can’t really talk to anyone. There is no one that can really relate to you. I should be doing well, without so much help. I felt I wasn’t doing something right, and it’s my problem.” This overwhelming feeling of isolation was a direct result of Issy’s lack of confidence, which manifested itself in the classroom.

I can’t tell you how many times I come out of a class discouraged and, you know, that sense of being alone. That sense of being like, “Damn it! I did not talk today.” Because you feel it! Especially at a place like this, where classes are not so big, and you know that the professor knows you are not talking.
One would speculate that attending a women’s institution would have helped Issy build her confidence in the classroom. Although Issy spoke of feeling comfortable in a women’s institution, she made an interesting point. “The fact that this is all women reduces some pressure because we are all women in the same class, but I guess it doesn’t give me total confidence and total comfort, that I raise my hand every time and that I am always participating.” In other words, for Issy attending a women’s institution did not necessarily allow her to participate more frequently. For Issy, the fact that she is Latina is still a factor that shaped her level of participation in the classroom. Moreover, the negative stereotypes associated with being Latina kept Issy in a state of constant anxiety within the collegiate classroom.

As a Latina, there is this fear that if I say something stupid or if I go off on a tangent that is going to be blamed on the fact that I am Latina. Like, “Oh mira esa Latina tan estupida [oh look, that Latina is so stupid]. She has no idea what she is talking about” so I prefer to stay quiet. And there is that, you know, that is a big part of it too, where you just feel like, “I don’t want them to think I am stupid” and part of it is no matter what I say or do, or what my name is, and I am fairly light skinned, but my last name gives it away…so if I don’t say something really smart, I prefer not to say anything.

In Issy’s case, in most of her classes, her level of participation and silence were attributed to her insecurity, lack of confidence, and lack of familiarity with the academic environment. That was exacerbated by the fact that Issy was a first-generation Latina college student. The negative stereotypes associated with being a Latina was a perpetual thought for Issy within the classroom. Issy spoke only if and when she was knowledgeable with the information. “I realize that silence is not productive, but counterproductive,” but it was easier for Issy to remain silent, than succumb to fulfilling a negative stereotype.
In light of this experience, Issy discussed the important role professors play in motivating, encouraging, and challenging women of color in the classroom.

Something that would encourage me to participate is for them [faculty] to recognize that it is difficult and recognize that in a room full of White students…you know, that know more and may have read this material before, it is easier for them to participate and raise their hand. As for some women of color, it is a little more difficult.

The inability of some faculty members to recognize that certain students had more academic capital than others was a major cause of discontent for Issy. Issy suggested that some students were privy to skills and information that allow them to succeed in college. The fact that she did not have college educated parents to provide her with an “insider perspective” placed Issy at an academic disadvantage. For Issy, having these skills (or as she called it, an “insider perspective”) inherently privileged a few students and placed some of students at a disadvantage. Nevertheless, Issy believed that professors can play a central role in encouraging students and providing a comfortable environment. From her experience, Issy believed that professors who understand that social, economic, racial, and sexual inequality exist seemed to be more willing to engage all students with the discussions at hand. Speaking of this, Issy enthusiastically smiled as she reflected on a blissful moment between her and her Spanish professor.

I took a class with her because we had a connection… She was from Mexico and my parents are from Mexico. So there was that connection there…I did every reading! There wasn’t one time I skipped. I attended all the classes. Other classes you might skip one or two because something happens…I did all the reading for every class. I participated in class! In every class! That was the only class I ever got an A in. I was also on it, because I knew Thea [the professor] was expecting it from me.

The admiration, respect, and ethno-racial cultural connection shared between Thea and Issy allowed Issy to feel a sense of confidence that she eagerly admitted never having felt
at Noel College. Her experience in this particular class was memorable because she never felt insecure, inarticulate, or unintelligent because she was Latina. In fact, this was the first class that Issy was empowered. “She [the professor] took the time to acknowledge that it was difficult for us [people of color]…and it was amazing to know that some [professors] care, that some understand the struggle.” Forging a relationship with this professor made her academic experience at Noel College much more bearable.

An Outsider Within: Issy’s Reflection of Noel College

I won’t forget it. It’s just the struggle and the lessons I am learning about that struggle… It’s been difficult. It’s been tough… It’s been a push. This experience has forced me to think about my experience as a minority, as a Latina.

Without hesitation, she spoke of her struggles about attending a prestigious institution where great minds that produce exceptional research, “You feel like the outsider. That is my experience.” Being an outsider within Noel College has forced Issy to examine aspects of her self in light of the education received. Attending Noel College has provided Issy with critical thinking skills, which allowed her to think outside the box, to be open-minded, and to question. These academic skills have helped her within the classroom, but Issy still cited her inability to participate and engage in the classroom as her biggest barrier to academic success at Noel College. At the same time, her experience at Noel College has forced her to think critically of who she is.

My mom, you know, she only had maybe a first grade education, maybe even lower. I am graduating from college. That is a big thing. That is amazing. I feel privileged to be here, and although sometimes it may feel like I am saying it over and over, for me it’s just a struggle and just trying to figure out who you are and just all these things mixed…What do you want to be, who do you want to become, who are you. [You are] trying to define who you are and trying to do well in school at the same time. It’s difficult to balance.
Issy’s attempts to do well in the classroom and simultaneously navigate the internal struggles of her ethno-racial identity led her to the following conclusion:

I came here unprepared in terms of the struggles that would have to go through because I am a minority, because I am Latina, because I don’t have what most students here have, resources, parents who know things, who have money to support you in whatever you want to do.

Nevertheless, Issy has and feels a sense of accomplishment. Regardless of the struggles and difficulties experienced, the fact that she was a first-generation, Latina, college student and the first to graduate from college has been a huge accomplishment for Issy and her family.

Kimora

Kimora and I met in a private enclosed office in the library of Noel College for our initial interview. She immediately struck me as a confident, charismatic, young woman who spoke her mind and commanded respect. Utilizing hand gestures and facial expressions for emphasis, Kimora was forthright and talked quite in depth about her family upbringing, attending school in Jamaica and transitioning to a collegiate academic environment within the United States.

Family Success and Educational Legacy

Growing up in Jamaica, religion and family were woven into the fabric of Kimora’s upbringing and schooling. The extended family unit (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins) played an instrumental role in Kimora’s personal development.

I was born in Jamaica, and I was raised in a single parent household with my mom. We are middle-class and we have always been middle-class. I believe as far as I can remember, I grew up with a really huge extended family around me. My
mom has six brothers and sisters, and we were literally neighbors...Right across from us, literally, our grandparents lived. My grandparents on both sides are pastors and some of my uncles are pastors as well. So I was raised in a really religious household.

Her family strongly believed that having a solid religious foundation was necessary to raise respectable young men and women of principle. As such, from a very young age Kimora had religious education in school and attended church frequently. It was in church that her mother taught her proper ethical/moral code of behavior from a religious perspective. Kimora even attended Bible school during summer vacations and participated in morning devotion when she resided with her grandparents. “We used to come together, as a family every Sunday... It really was a very fundamental part of my childhood.” Coming from a family that is strongly committed to religious and educational progress, Kimora surprisingly recalled how all of her family’s members possessed some sort of educational degree.

I think almost everyone in my family has gone to college or gone past high school. My mom has her second degree. My dad has his second degree... My aunt is a nurse... In the family I have accountants, nurses, and pastors, although one of my uncle’s is a science teacher, and I think that is about it. So, that was like a big thing, you know. “You just need to go to college [recalling what family members would say]. It wasn’t a question. After you leave college you can do whatever you like, but you are going for a minimum of 4 years. No questions asked!

Kimora stated she never felt pressured to pursue higher education. But it was evident that education and academic progress was a constant factor rather than anomaly within Kimora’s family. Because of this, it was a family expectation that was instilled in her since childhood and further developed by her mother. Dotingly speaking of her mother and the sacrifices she made to provide her with the best possible education, Kimora owes
much of her academic accomplishments to her mother’s persistence and educational investment.

Building Confidence and Maintaining Self-Efficacy:
A Mother’s Educational Investment

Kimora vividly recalled how transferring from various institutions made her prep (elementary) school experience awkward and at times difficult.

I kept transferring schools because my mom was never satisfied with how they taught there. I think in one school, when I transferred to it, my mom realized that I wasn’t reading at the level that should have been, and I was very frustrated in school, and I distinctly remember my mom going to school and having a huge argument with the principal because her daughter isn’t reading at grade level. So she transferred me to this other school that was great.

It was her mother who instilled the idea that anything was possible with education. “She really did instill that in me early on… You reap what you sow. If you put out the effort, you will get what you put in.” Having seen her mother balance a full-time job, provide financially, emotionally, and physically for her, and graduate with honors with a bachelor’s degree and later a master’s, solidified a growing determination for Kimora to succeed academically for her mother. Kimora admitted that her high school and college educational accomplishments stem from the close bond she has with her mother.

My relationship with my mother is so close, so so close. If she wasn’t behind me, I am thinking of all those times…where if I had a different mother, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Because if my mom wasn’t as attentive as she was for me in high school, I would be a 20-year-old girl who couldn’t read right now. I am going to be very serious. She was the person who made me study. All of those days when I wanted to go outside and play and go hang out with my friends or just watch TV. She made these rules that I thought were so impossible at the time. Only one hour of TV a day! But looking back at it, if she wasn’t behind me with a figurative whip, whipping me into shape, what would I be right now? I told her this so many times, and I will never stop telling her, if she was not behind me, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I wouldn’t have these study habits, the dedication,
and I wouldn’t have the morals that I have, and I love who I am as a person, because of her.

The emotional, physical, and spiritual support Kimora’s mother provided was invaluable. Kimora’s mother built “a sense of purpose to learn more, to educate myself to be a well-rounded individual and to know as much as you can possibly know” for Kimora. This determination to learn, succeed, and overcome any obstacles that may impede her academic success allowed Kimora to build a strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence that was central to her academic achievements in prep school, high school, and as she pursued her studies in the U.S.

Educating Kimora Within Jamaica’s British Educational System

Kimora’s primary/prep school education began as an unpredictable journey. Although she admitted to having a rocky start (transferring between several elementary schools because of her mother’s dissatisfaction with the quality of education), she worked hard in the subjects she enjoyed the most—math and science—and continued to excel in those areas. Realizing that her inability to read at the appropriate grade level had the potential of impacting her admissions into a competitive high school, Kimora did her best to improve her reading skills.

Elementary school was different in the British system. When I was growing up in elementary school, because I was a good student, because I could read at the level I could, I was the one [thinking] that if I didn’t go to class, I could not fully internalize [understand] what was being taught. So if she [teacher] spoke, I would get it! So you tell me, for example, the Arawaks were the first people in the Caribbean, I can tell you three weeks from that day without picking up a book that the Arawaks were the first. That is just how I learned, so I didn’t participate much in class because I couldn’t read properly. But in terms of test… they [British educational system] gave test orally, and it was true or false and multiple choice and my mother, [pausing to think] I can sit here all day and talk about how pissed off she was… So I didn’t participate a lot, but when I transferred to my other
school, which was a small prep school, it was more about getting us to communicate and participate more in class.

Unlike the U.S. educational system that employed a number of different testing strategies to evaluate/assess a student’s academic ability, within the British/Jamaican educational system, Kimora’s ability to communicate and convey her thoughts effectively was essential to her academic promotion/graduation. Participation/communicating was not a requirement (within the classroom, where a percentage of your grade is assigned to it), but it was important for oral examinations. Her inability to read at the appropriate level not only impacted her grades, it affected her sense of self as a student. Although Kimora passed her oral examinations and was promoted to the next grade level, she continued to doubt her academic abilities.

Upon transferring and settling at another private elementary school. Kimora’s academics thrived. Not only did she continue to do well in math and science, Kimora’s reading scores improved tremendously, resulting in a boost of self-confidence and empowerment.

I became more confident…participated much more towards the end of elementary school and all through high school… because I was academically solid in math, science, and reading…Going to high school I was at the top of the class for seven years, so it wasn’t a big thing for me in terms of participation because I was confident in myself versus those years where it was like, I couldn’t read so I didn’t want to participate in class because I didn’t want to embarrass myself versus high school where I know I can do this. I am confident in myself so I participated a lot more.

Enthusiastically reflecting on her elementary and high school experiences, Kimora discussed how these institutions were unique in that they functioned as a family unit. In elementary school,

We did not call our teachers Ms. Whatever. It was aunty and uncle. I knew the principal as Aunty Whatever and the gardener as Uncle Whatever. It was really
family-oriented, and it was so small that everyone knew each other, and I think that is one of the things that I loved the most about that school.

Having an established relationship with administrators, staff, and faculty members at her elementary school was essential to her academic growth and institutional acclimation. The fact that the school was small and intimate provided Kimora with the opportunity to interact with instructors more frequently. Shedding away her fears and anxiety of interacting with instructors, participating, and asking questions became customary for Kimora in high school. While Kimora attended an all-female, private, high school, she attributed her desire to learn more, study hard, and become the best possible student to one particularly teacher she referred to as Aunty Apple.

Aunty Apple was not your typical teacher who lectured at students and expected regurgitation of information in order to pass the required regional exams. Described as an instructor who was down to earth and ahead of her time:

[Aunty Apple] was so instrumental in getting me out of that awkward shell… She is someone who has changed my perspective [on education and life]. I still talk to her ‘til this day, and we still email each other. This woman was the funniest person I ever met. Like, she was strict, but she had such a command of the class that you had to admire her. She is in her early 40s, and I think she is phenomenal. I will never forget this woman… She was amazing. I remember in our accelerated math class and she was like, “Well, we are ahead today so let’s talk about life!” She was like, “Ladies, do any of you have boyfriends? Why are you having boyfriends at this age?” [laughing] She was phenomenal, just the way she interacted with us, and she always gave us [stream of thought changed] I mean at the time, we [the students] were like, “Why is she telling us this weird advice?” But when I look into it, you are like, “Wow, she was right”… So it was the combination of the weird advice and she was the greatest math teacher ever. One of the greatest I ever had. She made me love the subject, even when I was hating it so much in 12th grade and didn’t want to do math anymore she would always calm me down to the point where I would take out the math book and try again. She was just someone who was just to the point, and she was an inspiration.

Kimora’s relationship with Aunty Apple speaks to the centrality of faculty-student relationships/interactions with respect to students’ academic commitment and
persistence. The patience and encouragement that Aunty Apple gave Kimora created a safe space in the classroom where Kimora felt comfortable sharing aspects of her academics as well as her lived experiences. Aunty Apple took the time to establish a relationship with Kimora and to expose her to academic and lived experiences to help reengage/recommit Kimora to her education. One can speculate that Kimora described Aunty Apple as phenomenal, amazing, inspirational woman, the greatest math teacher, and instrumental in changing her life because Aunty Apple took the time to establish a relationship with Kimora and care for her in a way that she never experienced before. The combination of her family’s loving, supportive upbringing, her mother’s investment in her education, and Aunty Apple’s encouragement and guidance helped to prepare Kimora emotionally and academically for her academic career at Noel College.

Attending Noel College:
Racial Consciousness and Participation in the Collegiate Classroom

“I really didn’t have a big problem adjusting from high school…I think one of the biggest things I noticed since coming here [to Noel College] is that I am the only Black or person of color in the class.” Being the only person of color or Black woman in several of her classes was unusual for Kimora, as she came from a country where people of color were the majority. Despite the fact that the British educational system of Jamaica prepared Kimora for the academic rigors of Noel College, Kimora spoke in depth of a newly acquired racial consciousness that changed her perspective of racial dynamics in the United States and Jamaica.

As a sophomore psychology major, Kimora began to examine the foundations of various forms of psychological and structural oppressions in several classes. Although
her love for math and science continued, she was drawn to psychology for two reasons: the field of study was new and exciting as it was never taught in Jamaica’s school systems, and she was fascinated with understanding the complexities of race, racial identity construction, internalized racism, and discrimination. When Kimora began taking courses like “psych of racism,” she began to reflect on her racial interactions in Jamaica and her current collegiate experience at Noel College.

When I first came here [the United States], it was weird. I mean come on, Jamaica we’re like “out of many, we were one people.” Even though we would have [pause to gather her words] like, it’s different. Like you may have shadism, colorism, you know “the closer you are to looking White, the better you are,” but I mean it is pretty like diverse in how it is…but in the same way you are kind of experiencing some form of racial discrimination back home because you’re darker...But still somewhere in some person’s mind the closer you are to being White, the better you are because you will even find now in Jamaica there are some people, you know, how they bleach their faces, but it is so sad that their necks are like my color or darker and their faces are completely white. They think that they look well and you’re like, “Why are you destroying a part of yourself that is who you are? Take comfort and pride in what you are,”… and it was just [pause] really I didn’t think about it that much until the last day that I was doing the course, and it was like, this finally dawned on me because you can be experiencing this thing and you know it, but you don’t really know it. Then you are looking at the student and I am like, “Oh my goodness.” I was just in a state of shock, like I finally realized like all the dots were put together and it was like, “My god.”

The subtlety of how racism and internalized racism functioned in Jamaica made it so Kimora was oblivious to its psychological impact. While attending Noel College, Kimora had no choice but to process the psychological aspects of racism while trying to make sense of being the only women of color in several of her classes.

It was kind of like weird and kind of uncomfortable, but I don’t know I just like [pause to think] in the first semester after a couple of weeks, you are like, “You know what? Screw it! I don’t care what people think about me,” and I totally threw it off [thinking about the racism, discrimination, being the only black woman in the class], and then I got used to it [being a minority], so it was like, “Ok, I am here and I am a minority. I will live with it.” But the idea of discrimination and stuff [pause to think] I haven’t, I [pause] well maybe I am not
consciously aware of it because I am just trying to block it out as some kind of defense mechanism or something, but I really haven’t experienced it to the extent where, “Yes, you are Kimora, therefore, you are going to be treated differently.” Maybe there is some kind of bigger institutionalized racism that I really don’t even want to think about or I would go insane. But not personally, me, in a classroom, I haven’t experienced it. My professors have been really good to me too.

An overwhelming sense of frustration overcame Kimora as she recognized her minority status in the United States. Even though Kimora had the same level of education or even a higher level than many of her White counterpart, the mere thought of being discriminated against seemed to trigger anxiety and discomfort for her. Coming to terms with what it was like and what it meant to be a woman of color in the United States/at Noel College was a complex process for Kimora. Kimora seemed to have struggled with her status as a woman of color and minority because she was never in a position that required her to identify with these terms. Within the United States a racial classification system functions that seems to suggest if one looks a certain way or belongs to a certain ethno-racial group, one must also embrace and practice that culture and share their similar beliefs. Although she was treated well by her faculty, this belief, as we shall see in later descriptions of her collegiate experience, affected her levels of participation.

You do all the readings and stuff, so you’re more open to see these things. So at first, you know, I would just come into class, and I didn’t care and then I did Psych of Racism, and then it’s like, “Wow! I really am the only Black person in this class or the only woman of color. I have to represent and to look good, you know, the one representing the whole.” But that is always in the back of my mind, but really I might say, like, “Oh, (joking with my friends) I am the only person in the class that is Black. I will be the token Black person.” But I never really changed my behavior. I just say more.
With this newly acquired racial awareness, Kimora stated that she never changed her behavior. However, the description she provides of her academic experiences within the collegiate classrooms suggests otherwise.

Initially, when Kimora arrived at Noel College, she discussed how participating in class discussion was not a problem. Kimora talked, engaged, and challenged her peers and faculty when she had a genuine interest in the materials being learned and discussed. When she lacked interest in the course and or disliked the instructor’s pedagogy, her level of participation diminished significantly.

I participate more in my classes because I like the class the most. For example, I am comfortable in that area [psychology], and I am comfortable talking about that subject…So it depends on the class. In some classes I don’t care.

In fact, she really did not like participating in class discussions at all. If it were up to Kimora, she would have remained silent, listening to the conversations transpiring amongst her peers within the classroom. Because participation was worth a large portion of her final grade, she engaged in class discussions as much as possible. However, with the realization of her solo status (as a woman of color/minority in some of her classes), Kimora changed her behavior within the collegiate classroom. Despite the fact that Kimora stated that her behavior in the classroom remained unchanged, Kimora did modify her actions. Not only did she become more cautious with her responses and comments to students and faculty, but when she participated in discussion, she exuded more confidence.

With respect to her interaction with her peers, Kimora became more vigilant of her peers’ reactions and behavior towards her verbal responses during class discussions. Perhaps the change in Kimora’s classroom behavior stemmed from the anxiety associated
with the belief that as a Black woman, the perspectives she shared in the classroom would ultimately be interpreted (by her White peers and faculty) as an ideological representation of her entire ethno-racial group.

I can honestly say, it [being the only woman of color in the class] feels awkward. The more I am noticing, it does feel awkward, but when I get used to it, it’s ok. Because [pause to think] especially when I was doing my psych class last semester and I would always go back to Psych of Racism. In a way, you know that you are representing the whole, but when you are conscious of it, it makes you [anxious look on her face] like, “Oh my God!... Maybe it is already there [an awareness of representing the whole] and I am not noticing it or maybe I need to assess myself better on that,” but it hasn’t been a conscious decision. Maybe in the back of my mind, it’s an unconscious thing that I am not aware of because the class, maybe I think [pause to think] I am honestly saying that before I did that class [Psych of Racism], I hadn’t realized that you know, that it [racism, internal racism] was so, “Oh my God” type thing.

Fearing she may fulfill negative stereotypical expectations of her ethno-racial group,

Kimora’s communication patterns varied from participating (to refute negative stereotypes) to remaining silent in the collegiate classroom.

For Kimora, confidence was a major component of her ability to participate in class discussions. Kimora defined confidence as “having high self-efficacy, so if I have low self-efficacy, I am not going to participate in the class.” Not elaborating further on this point, it appeared that Kimora’s participation within the classroom was linked to the stereotype threat. It appeared that Kimora used her verbal participation as a means of challenging any stereotypical perceptions her peers and faculty may possess of her ethno-racial group.

Kimora’s high self-efficacy allowed her to speak with confidence to illustrate her command of the materials being discussed in class. Being able to speak confidently and contribute to the conversation at hand was important to Kimora. As she understood it, participation was necessary for learning and achieving an overall high GPA. On a
subconscious level, however, her ability to speak and confidently engage in academic
dialogue with peers/instructors could also be understood as a way of challenging the
stereotype of the underperformance of Blacks in educational settings. Although Kimora
was unaware of using her verbal participation in this manner, much of her confidence to
participate within the collegiate classroom stemmed from faculty encouragement.

Kimora specifically made reference to her English and psychology professors as
she reflected on their interactions.

I think he [English professor] has been trying to draw me out, to have me
talk a little in class. That is just what I think. In class he would say,
“Kimora and I were saying in office hours, and I was like, ‘Yes, Kimora,
speak on that.’” So…I think since then, I have been trying to like speak
out more in class time…but there is my psychology teacher who is very
engaging. Its like you get energized just watching her move around the
classroom and telling her little antidotes. So I tend to say more in psych
class.

Having engaging, supportive, and encouraging faculty members was central to Kimora’s
academic performance within the classroom. Forging relationships with instructors who
were invested in her academic progress allowed Kimora to speak and participate with
more ease. Despite their contribution to her education, Kimora still struggled with the
notion of representing the whole during class discussions. She recalled, “Now that I know
that it’s this big thing where you are representing like an entire people, maybe
unconsciously I am saying, well maybe to be quiet, to not say anything and then
embarrass myself, and I won’t embarrass the whole, is the best thing.” When students
perceive that their actions could be interpreted as confirming a stereotype held about their
group, often it affects their academic performance. In Kimora’s case, the racial awareness
she gained could have potentially affected her academic progress at Noel College, but the
encouragement received from family and certain faculty allowed Kimora to build upon
her self-efficacy and academic success. The fact that Kimora did not overtly experience 
racism in the classroom appeared to have had a positive effect for Kimora’s academic 
development (as she continued to get good grades), but the silence she engaged in speaks 
to the internal struggles of racial identity for Kimora. 

Kimora’s feelings seemed to have intensified in class with the possibility of being 
negatively associated with her ethno-racial identity group when she spoke. Her 
apprehension with performing poorly and/or providing inaccurate information in front of 
her peers and faculty increased her anxiety about speaking. Thus, she kept silent in 
certain settings. Like many students, Kimora attributed her silence in class discussion to 
lack of understanding, incomplete homework assignments, and boredom. However, 
depending on the class, the instructor’s pedagogy or the discussion at hand, her silence 
was an “unconscious” response to her internal struggle with racial identity and 
stereotypes. 

Kimora’s her verbal participation and/or silence in class discussion stemmed from 
the same ideological base—the fear of representing the whole and confirming to negative 
stereotypes of her ethno-racial group. Kimora explicitly challenged her peers and 
critically assessed course materials by drawing from her experience-based knowledge to 
demonstrate her overall engagement in class. Implicitly, one could speculate that 
Kimora’s verbal participation refuted the stereotype of Blacks and academic 
underperformance. At the same time, Kimora engaged in silence from fear of fulfilling 
negative stereotypes of Blacks and/or saying something ignorant during discussion. 
Hence, Kimora’s internal struggle with stereotype threat produced different outcomes 
within the collegiate classroom. Kimora verbally participated and shared her opinion and
simultaneously engaged in silence so as not to validate negative stereotypes held about Blacks/Jamaicans.

Reflection of Noel College

Prior to her arrival in the U.S., Kimora rarely thought about race, racial identity, and the role it played in society. Attending Noel College forced her to reassess her views on race, racial construction, and how it functions and impacts her life experiences. Kimora’s collegiate experience within the classroom speaks to the complexities associated with voice, participation, silence, social and racial identity for some women of color. Like many international students, Kimora was unaware of the racial dynamics of the U.S. and the role it would play in her academic process. The racial awareness that emerged at Noel College created a racial identity that was tangible, where Kimora drew from her experience-based knowledge to engage in class discussions. While reflecting on her education, Kimora discussed the benefits of attending Noel College as well.

There has not been an environment that has nurtured me like [this]. It is a good thing because you will have the confidence enough to go and tell someone to F themselves off when they tell you crap… So there are all of these benefits to going to an all-girls’ school. The teachers care about you, It’s not about sex. It’s everything else—the education, the support.

In spite of the struggles that Kimora has had to overcome, overall her academic experience at Noel has provided her with the opportunity to grow, to learn, and to become a well-rounded person, which will help her succeed in other facets of her life.
Violeta

Hard working, thoughtful, family-oriented, and critical about her education, Violeta is one of those rare young women who is grounded and far beyond her years. Many family and friends suggested that Violeta’s serious demeanor stemmed from her having an old spirit that shaped her disposition of life and the world. As a high achiever, Violeta’s commitment to educational advancement was based on a strong work ethic and a healthy sense of efficacy instilled in her by her family. Because her parents sacrificed a great deal to provide the best education possible for her and her siblings, Violeta’s biggest fear was disappointing them, especially, abuela [grandma]. Nevertheless, her family’s love and unending support has served as a foundation to keep Violeta focused in times of adversity. Many of the challenges Violeta encountered and experienced during her academic trajectory were a result of the educational disparities existing in the United States and Dominican Republic.

Family Background

As a self-identified Afro-Latina, Violeta was raised in a household with strong beliefs in Black empowerment and racial and gender equity. Violeta’s mother arrived in the United States from Dominican Republic during a time when social activism for racial and gender equality were at their peak. During this time, Violeta’s mother learned about the complexities of U.S. race relations between Blacks and Whites and the gender disparities existing between men and women. She began to advocate for racial and gender equity at all levels. Having encountered a number of racist experiences in educational and
work settings, Violeta’s mother was determined to raise her children with an awareness of social and racial justice to better equip them for life’s hardships.

Raising their four children in the U.S., Violeta’s parents and grandmother felt it was necessary to instill a strong work ethic and a strong sense of self-efficacy. As Black-Latinos, Violeta’s parents realized that the only way their children would survive in a society of racial difference/racial inequity was to provide them with the best possible education, while equipping them with a solid racial consciousness.

Overcoming Adversity: Family Sacrifices for Educational Advancement

As far back as Violeta remembered, education and academic achievements were highly regarded within her family. According to Violeta, her parents worked excessively to provide their children with the best education possible. As such, Violeta’s grandmother became her primary caretaker and educator for the first five years of her life.

My grandmother was my primary educator because my parents were working. My dad had 2 to 3 jobs at a time, and my mother was running the family business along with my father. So she was working 12-hour days as well. So when I went into kindergarten, unlike my other siblings, I went straight into private Catholic school. It’s so ironic because out of all my brothers and sisters, I am the only one to go to a private college as well. I think my parents learned by the time they got to me that the best education to them was in private institutions, and so I went to St. Isabella School in Florida.

Violeta enthusiastically spoke of the wonderful memories she shared with her grandmother.

Probably one of the best memories is waking up and her making me leche [milk] with chocolate, chocolate milk. Just the little things and now grandma says I was always her little partner, we’ve always been together. So going away for college was really hard for her as well.
As she continued to reflect on her earlier childhood education, Violeta spoke of the value of speaking Spanish.

Although she [grandma] understood English, it was all Spanish-speaking at home. I would watch, I remember so clearly in my head, Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street. So I think I had the notion of what English was, but I definitely believed that I could not distinguish between the two languages at an early age.

Like many immigrant families, maintaining their natal language was a way to remain rooted in their cultural heritage. Violeta’s grandmother saw the value of speaking Spanish (to keep the children grounded in their Dominican culture). But as Violeta’s primary caretaker, she also had a responsibility to immerse Violeta with English to equip her with the necessary skills to function in society. Viewing programs like Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers; Neighborhood was customary for Violeta and her grandmother. These educational programs allowed Violeta to practice speaking English while being exposed to American culture. Unable to distinguish between Spanish and English at such an early age, Violeta learned both languages fluently. Spanish was spoken in the home with her grandmother and parents, Spanglish (a combination of Spanish and English) was spoken with her siblings and English was discussed in public settings (schools, community centers). It was not until Violeta attended elementary school that she began to notice people’s behavior towards racial, linguistic, and culturally diverse people.

Biculturalism: Acknowledging Cultural Differences, Negotiating Multiple Identities

The difference existing between U.S. American culture and Dominican traditions became apparent to Violeta when she began at St. Isabella Elementary School. According to Violeta, St. Isabella Elementary School was one of the least expensive, private,
Catholic schools in Florida. Because it was located in a predominantly poor to working-class, Black and Latino community, certain resources were not readably available for the students (books, computer, technological equipment). Nevertheless, Violeta was always committed to her academics and described herself as a dedicated student. Unable to remember explicit details of her academic classroom experiences at St. Isabella’s, she described her experience of feeling different from her classmates/peers.

Although it was better than the public schools, the education was still good. It was still not like those predominantly rich schools. I had a mix of Latino and Blacks in my classroom. So St. Isabella’s was fun and nice, I never had to…[thinking] I knew I was different from the rest…It was a *sana* [safe] place to be, very healthy. I never felt like I had to defend myself, question who I was. I felt accepted overall. I had my friends, and I knew I was different in the aspect that all my White friends would always be able to go to sleepovers… They would go to the malls by themselves and their parents would obviously drop them off… So I mean in those cultural aspects I felt very different, and I could definitely see how I was different from the White kids.

Although she enjoyed the education received and the friendships created at St. Isabella’s, Violeta was too young to know how racial ideology and social structures functioned in society to maintain a system of educational inequity. Ignorant of these factors, Violeta equated being different to the distinct parenting styles existing between the parents’ of her White American friends and her Dominican parents. The fact that her White friends had more freedom to go to the mall unaccompanied and to stay up late watching movies, made her feel different. As she continued to reflect on various educational experiences, Violeta realized that as a child she experienced exclusion because of her race.

I would always come so well combed to class and my hair would be in braids. I always wanted to have my hair loose like the other White girls, and my grandma or my mom, when they prepared me for class in the morning, they would always make sure my hair was to the best. But at the end of the day, at the end of playtime, I would come with my hair undone. I would try to loosen it like the rest of the girls. I also remember one time when none of the girls wanted to play with me at the playground. I don’t think I really understood the extent of what that
meant. But thinking upon it now, I remember that at times I was excluded from certain little groups of playing, and the teachers would come and say, “Everyone has to play or there is no playtime.”

Despite the fact that these experiences had a minor impact on Violeta’s self-esteem/self-efficacy (due to her family’s love and support), the experience speaks to the racial exclusion experienced as a child. At the same time, Violeta also spoke of the exclusion associated with speaking Spanish and/or Spanglish in her elementary school.

Violeta believed that an unspoken code of exclusion existed in St. Isabella’s towards individuals who spoke Spanish or were bilingual. Being bilingual (speaking, Spanish and/or Spanglish) became a distinct marker of her cultural difference. Although Violeta did not view her ability to speak multiple languages as a hindrance, she believed others perceived it as such.

I really notice the formality between the languages, and this was not something my [White] friends would ever have to encounter… I did not know that such a hard distinction between languages and what comes with languages and what languages embodies as a people and how people use language for power existed.

Unable to clearly describe what she was experiencing, Violeta seemed to be grappling with one of the most fundamental dilemmas facing most immigrant youths educated in the United States: the struggle between remaining loyal to their cultural origins and traditions or immersing themselves in American culture. Although her family equipped Violeta with a firm racial and cultural identity, she felt pressure to fit in and to adopt cultural values of American society/community. Despite the fact that Violeta did not divest her Dominican cultural patterns, she came to realize that language and power work hand in hand to marginalize and exclude certain groups of people. This theme of exclusion is not unique to Violeta’s experience in the United States. In fact, Violeta
discussed how her bicultural US-Dominican upbringing and her Black ethno-racial features functioned as a means of exclusion in Dominican Republic.

Racism Through Social Elitism: Living in Dominican Republic

After completing the seventh grade in Florida, Violeta and her older brother moved to Dominican Republic with their parents and maternal grandmother. After working multiple jobs and finally selling the family business, Violeta’s parents returned to Dominican Republic and realized their Latino dream of purchasing land and constructing their 7-bedroom home. Although Violeta’s family was in a better financial situation, the move to the island introduced Violeta to a blatant form of intra-group racism manifested through elitism.

Moving to Dominican Republic was a whole new dynamic. I was still among Dominicans, although there was a different kind of racism and different kind of elitism in Dominican Republic that I think really shaped me to think of racial discrimination in whole new terms.

This racial difference and elitism that Violeta referred to was ubiquitous in her high school and the community in which she resided.

So I went to two different high schools. My freshmen and sophomore year I went to, they were both Catholic schools. [The first school] was not high scale, but it was good. But my junior and senior year I went to probably the highest, most expensive Spanish-speaking curriculum school in Dominican Republic. There are also American schools, where Dominican kids and kids that come from the US, like myself, attend. So it’s obviously people with some kind of means that can really pay for these high paying schools. I would say the [American] schools were anywhere from $5000 to $7000 a year. The highest paying school is probably almost $8,000 a year [in U.S. currency]...So I encountered, probably for the first time in such a small city, because this is such a small place relative to other cities, although it is a city and has city aspects, I saw what the elite is, how the elite live. Although I was in private school, I never knew that such an elite group really existed, and I felt that I did not encounter that in the United States because the elite group was so far away from me.
For the first time, Violeta found herself interacting with the sons and daughters of Dominican elite business owners, who employed a number of Dominican citizens and held a monopoly on import/export businesses and finance. Studying and interacting with the social elite of Dominican Republic forced Violeta to assess her own ethno-racial identity and beliefs about race and social privilege.

It was a weird dynamic, and I definitely knew I was not [laughing] part of that elite, even though my parents had means to send me to these schools, I wasn’t part of the country club. I wasn’t going to their houses in the beaches… It was also my decision not to be part of that… For me to really break into that group, I had to sell out who I truly was.

Unwilling to “sell out” to please a privileged constituency, Violeta’s always embraced her Afro-Latina/Black Dominican identity. She never tried to assimilate or change the essence of who she was. In fact, her family taught her the value of negotiating her Dominican American cultural identity. But as a young adult wanting to socialize with her peers, it sadden her to realize that she could never be completely accepted in certain venues because of her race.

It’s just the aspect of knowing that you’re not part of this group…yes, you’re good. Yes, you have made it to this point, but you still don’t have the last name. You still don’t have the privileges, so then [thinking] and again I could have broken through. I could have done more, gotten more involved with them [the elite of DR] when they invited me to go to certain places, but I rather not go and experience the humiliation again.

The humiliation that Violeta spoke of was a public act of racism and exclusion that frequently occurred to Black Dominicans in Dominican Republic. According to Violeta, the treatment of poor Afro-Dominicans or Dominicans from Haitian descent is harsh in Dominican Republic. The legacy of inhuman treatment towards poor, Black-Dominican citizens and (Haitian) non-citizens alike could be one of the reasons that Violeta was discriminated against.
I went to a club one night with all of my friends, and when it was my turn to go in, they asked me for my card [ID] and I showed it to them and they were like, “Who invited you?” and I said, all my friends are here. They all invited me. They were like, “Oh no. This is a private party.” So, I didn’t go in. I called my father. He picked me up, and I went home. But then I started thinking about it, and it wasn’t [a private party]. I talked to one of my friends, and it wasn’t really a private party. What the guy was really asking was, “Who told you, you could come in here?” and because I didn’t say a name of power, because that is what they are asking you to say…I wasn’t on my feet and didn’t say the powerful last name. I didn’t get in. And obviously if I would have been White and had more of a Spanish kind of look, I would have gotten in… There definitely have been articles written about how there is discrimination in these elite dance clubs. So from that point on, when my friends invited me out, I would just say, No.”… I didn’t want to go through that humiliation again.

Instead of allowing the racism and excessive privilege to consume her, Violeta equipped herself with the necessary emotional tools to persevere and succeed academically. In the public realm (with her peers in social functions), Violeta experienced racism, humiliation, and exclusion. However, within the educational arena of the high school classroom, Violeta flourished academically and was known as one of the smartest young woman in her class.

Violeta’s High School Experience in Dominican Republic

Attending one of the most prestigious high schools in Dominican Republic during her junior and senior years, Violeta received the best possible education that money could buy. Within her cohort, Violeta was known as one of the smartest students in her class. She was dedicated and hard-working. She took all her courses seriously and made sure she built relationships with peers and faculty members alike.

I did my homework, and I was always prepared for class. I always wanted [thinking] I knew I needed to get the best grades possible to get into the big American colleges. So, I always made sure to do what was asked of me. Most of the time, I would do more. And the good thing about high school that I feel is different from College is that I would put in the time and would see the
grades…But in the classroom, I spoke every day, I never felt silenced because I knew what I was talking about. I always wanted to participate because participation was 10 to 15 or 20 points [of overall grade], so I knew that if I didn’t participate, my grades would suffer… Talking was the most important aspect of getting the A’s I needed. Realizing the value of speech/participation for her overall grade, Violeta always made an effort to contribute in all her classes. Violeta attributed this ability to speak openly in class and to seek out answers to complex problems to her parents and her high school History and Chemistry professors. “You could go to the professors, hug them, and joke with them. I think that is also part of the Dominican Culture.” Violeta described a relationship where student and faculty engaged in respectful camaraderie. This type of relationship allowed Violeta to feel more comfortable in the classroom, which allowed her to exert her agency and openly express her perspectives. Having two Afro-Dominican professors who were personable, knowledgeable, and educated in their perspective fields also gave Violeta a sense of pride of being Afro-Dominican. Moreover, their relationships taught Violeta that “speaking, participating, contributing, asking questions” were invaluable to her learning process. Employing such skills within the collegiate classroom of Noel College also proved beneficial to Violeta’s academic experience.

The Contested Space of Noel College: Academic Progress and Racial Challenges

Violeta attended Noel College because of its academic reputation and institutional composition of being a top tier women’s institution. Yet, ironically, Violeta felt an overwhelmingly sense of self-doubt that was further exacerbated by being the only “Afro-Latina” in many of her classes. Questioning her academic abilities and whether she
belonged at Noel College became a frequent occurrence throughout her educational trajectory.

Attending a women’s college is a whole different dynamic, and it’s one of the main reasons I wanted to come here. The person who motivated me to apply and come to Noel College told me how you would be around other powerful women and I really do feel it in the classroom. When I am in the classroom and when it’s only women in the classroom, I feel like I have a lot more authority. I think I am getting a very different experience from women who attend a co-educational institution. On the bright side, I feel like I have been given a lot more opportunity to form and voice my own opinions.

As a sophomore, majoring in economics and romance languages, Violeta discussed becoming more empowered through sharing perspectives and voicing her opinions in class discussions. Participating in discussions enabled her to build from her sense of self-efficacy and to exert her agency within classrooms. Nevertheless, Noel College seemed to be a contested space for Violeta. It was an environment that offered her an abundance of personal and academic growth while challenging her sense of self/identity as an educated Afro-Latina.

Describing her education as a “unique experience,” Violeta realized early in her academic trajectory that her tenure at Noel College would prove to be academically challenging. Returning to the United States to begin her college education was an intimidating experience for Violeta.

I was scared coming back to college here in the United States. I was studying in a Spanish curriculum school. I wasn’t writing essays in English, and I knew I didn’t have the same vocabulary as most of my fellow peers here. So I felt that I was at a big disadvantage. Although I gained a lot from studying abroad, I think it has hurt me when I want to articulate things, and I can’t to a certain extent because I don’t have the vocabulary… I love new challenges and definitely this has been a challenge, and I think I knew that. I knew this institution was going to be a challenge, but I never envisioned it being a racial challenge as well. I always just thought, “Ok, I need to have more education and I know this is going to be hard. I know I probably can’t write at par with other students, but I haven’t been trained to do certain things.” So I knew it was going to be hard for me in the classroom
just learning, just having the abilities that were not taught to me in high school. But I don’t think I ever thought of the challenges that come with being an Afro-Latina in a place like this.

Having graduated salutatorian from high school, Violeta knew she was an intelligent individual. Her limitations with English academic writing forced her to work hard to compensate for the lack of years in an academic English-speaking classroom. Although slightly concerned, this was not an issue for Violeta, as she thrived in challenging situations. The frustration that Violeta experienced in the collegiate classroom of Noel College was a result of collegiate classroom dynamics (classmates who were clueless of economic injustice, racial and gender inequity and the lack of instructional intervention on the part of some faculty members during important classroom discussions).

I have taken a lot of classes that are oriented to the Latino experience. So it’s very hard hearing other people who have not gone through these experiences commenting and making assumptions and just having their own opinion and personally they not knowing that this is my reality, and this is what people like me are going through each and every day, and that is not a topic I can just discuss in the classroom and forget about it. Like this is my life, and this is what I have to deal with when I go into the workforce, and in the classroom it’s very frustrating actually. I remember sometimes people making comments that I just want to be like, “No,” and I just wanted to scream out, but then I don’t even say anything ‘cause how do I contend this? How do I really make them change their point of view? I think overall my feeling has been one of frustration within the classroom with certain people’s comments on different aspects.

Violeta was strategic about the courses she enrolled in. Classes that were too detached from reality and unconnected to real life experience rarely stimulated conversation for Violeta. As such, she always chose courses that allowed her to build and make connections with her personal experiences. Violeta became frustrated with the apathy and ignorant comments of some of her peers. Combined with her inability to articulate her position clearly in academic English, Violeta experienced increased anxiety and self-doubt with her ability to question/challenge student’s perspective in class.
I can’t remember the comment, but I definitely remember the incident, and I wanted to say something, and I was just discouraged, and I didn’t even know if what I was…[paused to think] I didn’t have the confidence in me to really think that this was an important point to raise in class anymore. So I think it was probably a combination, both to say, “Ok this won’t really change anything first of all” [if she questions/challenges students], and I questioned whether I knew the information I was saying was really right. Is it fully correct? So it was also questioning up to where my knowledge was in the actual area of study in order to correct or challenge the person, although I was feeling that it was affecting me or hurting me.

Violeta felt a sense of social responsibility as an “Afro-Latina,” to engage, challenge, even educate her peers about their misleading and/or erroneous beliefs many raised about race/racial issues. In doing so, Violeta became self-conscious with her ability to confront her peers. She questioned whether she had sufficient knowledge of the course material to challenge her peers and questioned whether her English was proficient enough to do so. The fact that she was often the only Afro-Latina in her class also impacted her classroom interactions and behavior. When asked whether being knowledgeable in the subject matter was necessary for her participation in class, Violeta quickly responded,

I would say it was more to the point of challenging someone in the classroom or questioning them. Because I feel like I don’t have the authority to say something, and if I say something without the authority, I feel like I am shut down right away, by the professor themselves.

Violeta’s fear of disapproval/criticism by both her professor and student peers impacted her ability to participate. One professor’s abrupt dismissal of her perspectives led Violeta to self-silence in the classroom. The professor’s action created a brief deterrent to Violeta’s learning. Feeling unheard triggered a loss of motivation and discomfort towards completing course work. Realizing that her participation was essential to her learning process, Violeta’s became more conscious of how she voiced her perspectives in class.
“You are damned if you do, and damned if you don’t”: Participation in Collegiate Classrooms

Reflecting on the factors that contributed to her verbal participation in the collegiate classrooms of Noel College, Violeta quickly cited faculty pedagogy (instructional ability to engage and teach complex materials) and faculty-student interaction as two important aspects shaping her participation. Violeta found herself participating in classrooms where “professors were encouraging, open to hearing opinions, provided space and time for dialogue, were approachable, has a sense of humor, structured with teaching, interested in what I had to say, remembered comments and suggestions made in class and finally a professor who knew my name.” If faculty members possessed these characteristics, Violeta was more at ease and confident within the class. Class substance was also important. “When I feel like a class is actually giving back to me, and I can actually build from that class…I feel when I participate, I am actually learning more and can contribute to the discussion.” Although talking was central to her learning process, Violeta also identified non-verbal forms of participation that were just as important to her learning (i.e., completing homework assignments, being prepared for class). However, as Violeta delved deeper into her classroom experiences, it became evident that the role of negative stereotypes and group representativeness also impacted her ability to voice her perspectives during discussions.

As a minority in this institution, I feel like in the United States, it is always placed upon us to be a representative model, and if you are not and if you don’t come in prepared to class, you are considered ignorant and you’re letting down a lot of people, so I feel. And if you come into the classroom and you are not prepared and you are not participating, the professor…I mean I don’t know if this is true because I am not a professor, but you feel the professor is going to view you like, “Oh, that damn Latina! She never comes to class. She is never participating. This is why we can’t have these people here.” So it’s like you are almost proving yourself constantly. “Yes, I am doing the reading. Yes, I am doing the homework.
Yes, I am going to your office hours and yes, I actually do care about your class.” But I always feel like, and I have talked to other minorities about this, if I don’t come prepared to class, then there is no point of even going to class. Because if I can’t participate, then I feel like everyone is viewing me, and the professor would say that this person brings nothing to classroom discussion. So in class, I feel like it is almost a responsibility that as a minority you are forced to represent so many people.

Discussing the struggles and contradictions of being an Afro-Latina in the collegiate classroom setting of Noel College, Violeta spoke of the added pressure she felt to speak and to articulate her perspectives clearly. Violeta believed that an unspoken code existed within the classroom, “as a minority, participation in class is almost a responsibility forced upon us, to be a representative of your entire group.” Believing that her academic performance within the classroom was generalizable to her entire ethno-racial group, Violeta at times displayed characteristics of stereotype threat (i.e., believing that peers and professors judged her negatively because of her ethno-racial identity, assuming she brought nothing to the discussion because of her lack of participation as a Latina). This consequently made Violeta cautious of her communication patterns within the classroom. When Violeta voiced her perspectives, she constantly thought of conforming to a negative stereotype about Afro-Latinos or Blacks. As such, Violeta’s voice became a vehicle by which she refuted negative racial perceptions of Afro-Latinos and simultaneously learned new academic materials within the classroom. Violeta’s silence within the classroom seemed to be directly linked to her inability to articulate her position within a discussion.
Ambiguous Silence

“To be silent, is to be disconnected, not happy, not engaging, disappointed, unmotivated, distant, lacking opinion.” Describing silence as a negative, unconstructive, communicative approach, Violetra attributed her silence to her inability to articulate an opinion on an issue. Silence emerged for Violetra when she had insufficient evidence to support her point of view during discussions. Instead of embarrassing herself in front of her peers or being rejected by her professors, silence became a safe haven or as she described it a “third space.”

I choose not to speak most the time when I don’t feel like I have authority in the subject, when I don’t feel like I can state my opinion strong enough or have enough backing…If I can’t find the actual part in the book or if I don’t find evidence of what I am saying is correct, then I feel like I am almost not in the classroom, that I am in this Third Space. Whether it’s in the classroom and the professor and/or students are speaking, sometimes I am like what you would call an omniscient narrator. When you are quiet, engaged, and on the side viewing everything. So I feel like I am there, but I am not really there. So I am just listening and watching other people, but I am not part of the group. So it’s almost of a feeling of being segregated, away from what is really happening, not feeling involved, not feeling active, and just, it’s just a passive kind of feeling that constantly happens.

Seeming to be in a state of vigilance within the classroom, in order to prevent academic failure or embarrassment that could reify negative stereotypes about her group, Violetra’s self-consciousness (about her academic abilities) resulted in a deliberate act silence. Vague about the classes she chose to remain silent in, Violetra provided an interesting depiction of her silence. Not only did it seem ambiguous, but the silence she employed held a distinct meaning, depending on the context in which it was done.

In an effort to make sense of her silence, it appeared that Violetra had unconsciously assigned negative and positive attributes to this phenomenon. When Violetra discussed being in a “third space,” she described herself as an “omniscient
narrator…quite, engaged, on the side viewing everything, listening to everything, and watching other people.” It almost seemed like Violeta was in a state of knowledge acquisition and engagement when she was in a “third space,” which could be perceived as valuable and important. However, Violeta also discussed feeling a disconnect from class dynamics with her inability to voice/participate in the discussion at hand. As such, Violeta felt “segregated, away from what is really happening, not involved, not active and just passive…which consequently leads my mind to wonder and think of other things.” Although she often found herself in this “third space” during class discussions, Violeta admitted that she never thoroughly considered how her voice, lack thereof or being in this “third space” influenced her learning within the classroom.

Bitterly Gratifying: Reflections of Noel College

Realizing that society functions to privilege individuals of visibly White or European ancestry over individuals of African ancestry, racial privilege became a phenomenon that implicitly shaped Violeta’s academic experience from the U.S. to Dominican Republic. Although hardship and challenges were expected, Violeta always expressed gratitude for the superb education and academic credentials received, especially from Noel College. But the environment of Noel College made her feel trapped.

I don’t know, it says a lot as to who is able to make it here [at Noel College]. Who is actually able to stay here, be in an environment where you’re happy to be here and overall not trapped? Not feeling as sense of being trapped, but a sense of really loving being in the classroom, and I think it is a big dynamic when you are the minority within the classroom. Sometimes you just feel like whatever you say, your point would never really get across and sometimes, personally I have felt it, that it is because of my vocabulary isn’t at a level and I have come to realize that it does not matter all the words in the dictionary, these people will never come to
Violeta’s description speaks of an academic environment that created a problematic duality for her. As a student of color who values her education, Violeta loved learning and being in the classroom. However, as one of the few students of color in her classes, Violeta felt confined or trapped at Noel College. Not only did Violeta express that her voice was not being heard within the classroom, but she deeply believed that her situation would not change because her White peers and faculty would never understand what it is like to be a minority in a predominantly White institution like Noel College. As such, her overall collegiate experience has been gratifying in many ways, but it has been a constant struggle. From participating in the classroom to challenging ignorant comments, Violeta’s collegiate experience was often an emotionally draining ordeal. Nevertheless, Violeta realized that attending Noel College has its rewards.

The education received at Noel College will provide me with social mobility and the educational advancement I need to excel in society, but it’s also about collective progress. I know I am making individual progress, but I question whether collective change can be achieved.

This notion of collective progress and change through educational advancement was embedded in Violeta since childhood. Her parents believed that individuals privileged to have an education should also give to those less fortunate. With this basis, Violeta
continues to work hard towards achieving academic success and making the most of her college education.

Yoli

As we laughed about students, the “White” environment and its lack of “flava,” Yoli continued to be an awe of her matriculation at Noel College. Like many educationally disadvantaged women from the inner city, Yoli was not privileged to a quality education. She was not privy to the skills that were imperative to succeeding in a prestigious institution like Noel. As a non-traditional, first-generation, Latina, transfer student who is a single mother of three children, Yoli defeated the odds. Her troublesome upbringing and lack of educational preparation did not impede her from seeking a higher education. Her life experience as a young mother was in fact the impetus for seeking her college degree.

An Education Cut Short: Motherhood and Struggles

By the time Yoli settled in Massachusetts, her entire family had relocated three times between two states and one island. These relocations in conjunction with her family instability created a stressful educational experience for Yoli. Much of her early education was a blur. What she does remember from her early education was that school was difficult and unpleasant. In retrospect, Yoli realized that these feelings stemmed from the lack of support and encouragement to succeed received from her family and school teachers. “I never had a mother or father who really sat down and really said, ‘Look, you need to do this. You need to do that or continue doing what you are doing.’ I have never
had that.” Being the oldest of five, Yoli longed for a loving, supportive and encouraging family unit. Instead, Yoli’s upbringing was, as she described it, “a very intense childhood.” “I grew up very aggressive… I come from a very angry background, like seriously, I used to fight a lot… You know, my mom was abused a lot too…like my brother used to beat me up all the time.” The family violence and instability was one of the factors that eventually led to Yoli’s educational disconnect.

Yoli became distracted, lost focused, and started getting into all sorts of trouble. Shortly after dropping out of high school, Yoli became a teenage mother, working several minimum wage jobs to support herself and her baby. In the midst of her struggles and insecurity as a young mother, Yoli always had educational ambitions. She never knew how she managed to have this drive within her (considering her upbringing and lack of educational support), but she knew, at some point in her life, she would return to complete her education. Getting an education was the only way Yoli would improve her situation and that of her family.

I always wanted to go to school. I always knew that school was important because it was always told to me, but I just never knew how important it was. So in the back of my mind, while I was trying to work, and I was a teenage mother, I was always joining alternative programs for teen mothers… And I was trying to work, and it just never worked. So one day I had to make a sacrifice. I had to leave this job in order to focus on school and finish something I started…So I felt I had to set goals for myself as a mother, and this happened in my 20s when I found myself wanting a change. I wanted to change for my children, and I wanted to leave things I had done in the past behind, and I wanted to move forward, and I knew the only outlet for me at the moment was for me to go to school, and I did it. I took my GED and passed it.

Even after she dropped out and became pregnant, she sought alternative means of remaining engaged with her education. Upon receiving her GED Yoli registered for courses at a community college and began her path towards higher education.
Yoli was determined to learn as much as possible at community college. Because Yoli was unclear of her academic plan and whether she would pursue a vocational or academic track she began taking classes without a sense of direction.

I started taking classes at a community college in the area, and I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. I was just taking classes because I felt I had this educational gap I needed to fill… I wasn’t sure what I was going to do when I was at the community college, and when I tested into the school I scored very low. So I had to take remedial courses. I started taking English classes, and I took learning community courses, which were just awesome! They [the classes] forced me to read tons of literature on racism and topics that I was very unfamiliar with. And we had writing responses every week. So that was just like great practice for me. And it was a great way for me to learn how to put a paper and respond to a ton of reading that I had done. That was great practice for me.

Enthusiastically speaking of her educational experience at the community college, Yoli dominated the classroom. Not only was she eager to learn, but she engaged in dialogue, participated, and openly challenged her peers. When asked how she became so assertive within the classroom, Yoli simply stated:

At the community college there was a lot of support, if you go get the support. I learned how to go see a professor…I never knew how important that was to see a professor if you are having trouble with a concept, with math, writing or anything.”

Because of the relationship she forged with professors, Yoli gained a sense of confidence and comfort within the classroom at the community college. This connection with her professor, combined with her healthy self-esteem/confidence, enabled Yoli to contribute more frequently to class discussions. “I felt that that [participating] helped me, that gave me an understanding of what I was reading… Participating is a very connecting experience for me. I always connected it to real life experience.” Eventually deciding to pursue an academic track towards admissions into a four-year institution, Yoli became
consumed by her education. It became such a priority in her life that she isolated herself from family and friends. “I just wanted to be in school and just take it all in.” As she continued on her educational journey, Yoli, however, realized she was not being academically challenged. Instead, she found herself becoming complacent with the education received.

I think the classes at the community college did prepare me… It wasn’t like to the point where I was challenged, to the point where I felt like I couldn’t do it. So I just did it. You know, it was very natural for me. I don’t think I was uncomfortable to the point where I was like, “I can’t do this.”

Feeling an overwhelming sense of accomplishment as she worked towards completing her associates’ degree, her family, professors, and boyfriend encouraged Yoli to transfer to Noel College. With the encouragement of her family and boyfriend, Yoli took the initiative and applied to Noel College as a non-traditional student. “When I got accepted to this school, which was a shocker to me, I never thought that I would be coming to a school like this… So I transferred here, and it’s been intense.” Describing her experience at Noel College, Yoli candidly spoke of the distinct academic environment, its impact on her academic confidence, and the frustrations stemming from her interaction with traditional college age students.

Institutional Type and Academic Performance:
Noel College vs. Community College

As a women’s institution, Noel College values diversity of many forms. Non-traditional women and women of color are not only encouraged to apply; many are accepted under the premise of contributing to institutional and academic diversity. Having older, non-traditional, female students studying with younger women was seen
(by the institutional community) as a benefit to the educational experience of both groups. As a non-traditional Latina, Yoli’s unique educational trajectory made her an ideal candidate for acceptance to the non-traditional program existing at Noel College. This program was devised to provide older women with an opportunity to have a quality educational experience while working towards a bachelor’s degree. Excited about this educational opportunity, Yoli realized she had quite a challenge ahead of her. Comparing her academic experience at Noel College to that of the community college, Yoli observed some interesting differences between the collegiate environment and student body at each institution.

Upon her arrival to Noel College, Yoli described it as a remote place. Students who attended Noel College were different from the students at the community college. Although students did not share the same racial background, Yoli argued that many community college students shared a common experience of having dropped out of high school. Many were also working towards improving their grades or saving money to eventually attend a four-year, state or private college or university. Because of these common struggles, Yoli argued that students at the community college shared a common perspective on life’s hardships. This was certainly not the case at Noel College.

I didn’t feel this at the community college. I didn’t feel it at all, and now that I am here, I feel this social status, this privilege. You know, racist attitudes, you know? And it’s just like that is hard to deal with. It is real, real hard to deal with because it puts you in a zone, like you are invisible on this campus.

According to Yoli, these women were “bred to come here.” Not only did they have the financial means to attend an institution like Noel College; their parents have socialized them from a young age to succeed in a place like Noel.
These women [at Noel College] are for themselves. They are here to get their education, and they are supported by their parents. You know, they have their parents’ social economic background, and it’s so high… So it’s being in a place like this, you don’t know who you are around, and sometimes when you say something. They may say something to you that makes you feel like crap, like you don’t know what the hell you are talking about, and that sucks because I am 28 years old, and then you have a 17 or 18 year old trying to tell you what is right or wrong. It’s almost like condescending in a way.

Believing she was out of her league, Yoli began to display insecurities. In fact, as she scrutinized her own educational experience, she realized she lacked a competitive nature.

The women of Noel College were quite competitive regarding their academics. This competitive nature was completely foreign to Yoli. “My situation was so different… A lot of these women here just have it so easy. They get up, go to school, and they earn good grades. They are very competitive, and I am not like that…I feel like I need to learn how to be competitive.” At the community college, Yoli had no need to be competitive because few students opted to transfer to an elite, private college to continue their education. As a result, many students did not assert that competitive nature within the community college classroom. They simply participated and submitted assignments when they had to. Although Yoli believed that healthy competition among students within the classroom had the potential to encourage better grades, improve certain skills and leadership qualities, she also believed competitiveness had the ability to isolate students causing them to question their own academic abilities. In Yoli’s case, as a first-generation, Latina, non-traditional, transfer student (attending an elite women’s college), she questioned her academic abilities. The stress caused by self-doubt as she realized her academic substandard preparation led her to question whether she belonged at Noel. The new institutional environment coupled with her insecurities as a Latina, first-generation,
transfer student led her level of confidence and participation within the classroom to suffer.

Individual Perception and Institutional Type

I was very confident [in the community college classroom environment], and even if I didn’t have the correct answer or knew what they were talking about, I felt I was just very comfortable in my space. I feel like at Noel College I am out of my comfort zone, which is interesting, in the classroom setting… I feel very nervous to talk and sometimes I feel like I can’t express myself correctly. Like I know what I am talking about, but when I speak, I feel like everybody is looking at me and so I can’t express myself as well as I know I can… I don’t know, I am almost afraid to speak up, maybe not afraid, but intimidated and not as motivated as I was at the community college for some reason. So I am very cautious of what I say, and sometimes when I say certain things, I am kind of like reluctant to argue and comment on certain things… It was intimidating. They were very intellectual and very intelligent young women. They really were. Not saying that I am not either, but I was just like I am not going to speak in here because I felt like everybody was going to zoom in on me.

One can attempt to explain Yoli’s uneasiness, nervousness, and inability to express herself within the classroom as behaviors related to communication anxiety (fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person). However, the fact that Yoli spoke with such ease and comfort in the community college classroom challenges his notion, suggesting other factors were at play.

Describing herself as a “social person” who enjoys dialogue and participation, Yoli’s behavior within the classrooms of Noel College speaks to the complicated ways individual perceptions of institutional environments, coupled with being a first generation college student affects participation/academic voice. A combination of psycho-social features (insecurities, lack of confidence in academic abilities), social contextual (classroom size, student/instructor diversity, instructor’s pedagogy) and linguistic factors (inability to fluently engage/utilize academic discourse) have impacted Yoli’s ability to
freely express her opinions/perspectives in the collegiate classroom of Noel College. “I am often reluctant to speak because I question my being here. Is this place for me? Is this way over my head, you know…I don’t know, it’s almost like you feel like you don’t fit in the classroom.” As such, Yoli questioned whether she should even bother pursuing an education at Noel. Often, she admitted that she was her worst enemy.

Discussing her fascination with Biology, Yoli considered majoring in this discipline, but she convinced herself

It was way out of my league. I can’t take this, I can’t do this. I am not smart enough to do this. I don’t think I have what it takes to kind of go through with this major. I undermined my ability to kind of pursue what it is that I want to do even though I may struggle in the field.

This constant pessimistic outlook was not uncommon for first-generation college students, especially first-generation, minority, college students who often experienced self-doubt and tended to question whether they belonged in the collegial environment. To overcome these psycho-social issues and improve her performance within the classroom, Yoli found solace in professors of color at Noel College.

**Internal Classroom Dynamics:**
**How Professors of Color Shaped Yoli’s Performance**

Although Yoli realized the value in having relationships with professors at the community college, being at Noel College forced her to seek guidance and support specifically from professors of color. There was something about being in an elite predominantly White institution that led Yoli to seek out relationships with professors of color. Yoli made reference to two professors of color who helped her navigate through
her difficult experiences. Referring specifically to her Latin American Studies professor, Yoli recalled the advice he gave his students.

At the end of the semester he wanted to know what was disappointing about the class for us and I answered, “Communication.” I felt like there should have been more class discussion. At times I was the only one raising my hands, and that is because the topic was interesting to me. The slave trade and all that, that is very fascinating to me… He was disappointed at how passive we were and I was like “Yeah, that is so true. Why should I be passive in a classroom?” He was like, “This is your education, and you need to ask questions, and you need to be invested. You need to get the answers that you need because I don’t know what you know. You can’t let me deposit information and expect me to know what you know, without asking questions.” So that was like, “Wow!” It struck a cord in me. But I took it personal. I am going to make sure that I am not passive, that I make sure that I participate more.

Receiving advice from another professor of color, Yoli was advised to make an effort to interact with her instructors and attempt to forge relationship with them. Yoli was aware that these relationships were important to her academic success at Noel, but being in a different environment caused Yoli to be fearful and distant with her professors.

At Noel College I was scared. I didn’t want to go see them [professors]. I didn’t know how to approach them, but this semester I made sure that even though I was afraid to see Montes, that I would go to his office hours, weekly. Harassing him and asking him any questions whether it was a stupid question or not. I was making sure I did this because she [her professor] reminded me how important it was to my education… So I took this advice and applied it and it is important and I only got this information from professors of color.

Realizing that professors of color at Noel College were invested in her academic completion, many helped her better navigate the classroom and understand the academic environment of Noel. One suggestion was to speak and share her thoughts/perspectives with professor and peers in class more frequently. Unlike her experience at the community college, at Noel, Yoli became aware that speaking, participating, engaging in dialogue was a way peers and instructors assessed student’s academic abilities. Although
Yoli spoke of the reciprocal learning relationship that came from engaging in dialogue, she also found herself engaging in silence.

Participating, speaking in class allows me to put things in perspective. It gives me an understanding… I will ask a question, and that clarifies it for me, and then I know that I am learning… that it is a benefit for me. It helps me put things in perspective… But there are times, when they [students] are talking about a specific situation or something and you feel like you have something to say about it, but you are reluctant to say it, and you hold it in. You feel like you are being pulled down. You give up on yourself, and it’s just like it hurts, and it bothers you. Like I knew the answer, but why didn’t I say something? And it bothered me that I didn’t say something. I wish I would have spoken up or asked a question or something, and I didn’t. I was just sitting there taking notes, because I didn’t want people looking at me. I felt embarrassed, like I was going to embarrass myself with what I was going to say. So it was crazy! So I took notes, and I trained myself to do that, just to take notes and not kind of participate in class because I made myself believe that I couldn’t really, you know come up with an answer or question. So I was ok with it, but I should have asked the question because it’s good for the teacher to know me, to know that I participated, which lets them know I am interested in the subject, and I think it assures me that they know that I am trying. So when I don’t participate, I feel the instructor is thinking in their mind that I am not doing the work. It’s all psychological shit!

Describing the positive aspects of verbal participation and the connection to learning and understanding associated with speaking, Yoli’s decision to “train herself” to be silent (in certain classrooms) and focus her energy on writing notes was a tactic resulting from being the only non-traditional Latina in many of her course. Her fear of embarrassing herself with what she might possibly say in front of her highly educated peers and instructors caused Yoli to shut down in the classroom. Being highly distinctive or different from the majority of the students came with a price for Yoli, her self-imposed silence emerged from the belief that as a non-traditional, Latina college student, she would be judged more extremely and negatively stereotyped in comparison to her White female peers. The internal struggle Yoli described (of participating or remaining silent within the classroom) created much anxiety. The combination of being at a prestigious,
highly selective institution, coupled with the racialization and negative stereotypes associated with being a Latina, created a context that impeded her academic progress. Courses that specifically dealt with race and/or racism was where Yoli chose not to speak. “Again, I felt like I am not going to put myself out there, so I chose not to really express myself and put my perspective and my experiences out there to be judged.” Although Yoli admitted that there were situations in which her silence resulted from confusion or having nothing to contribute, she described that her classroom experience at Noel College “has been crazy, I have had an emotional rollercoaster type experience.”

Reflections of Noel College: Resources and Career Opportunities

Initially feeling lost and out of place with the transition from a community college to Noel College, from part-time student to full-time student, Yoli came to appreciate and value her education at Noel College.

My educational experience here means everything to me. It’s my accomplishments. I feel that being successful in my academic career is something that gives me hope, to know that I have accomplished something for myself, and that I am breaking barriers. So it’s very important to me.

Although it took some time getting used to, attending a women’s college provided Yoli with the academic skills she needed to succeed and navigate in society. Yoli’s experience at Noel College also gave her a consciousness around gender, racial, and economic inequality that allowed her to understand how individual and structural inequality shapes people’s lived experience. Hence, despite the challenges experienced in the classroom, Yoli’s educational experience at Noel College has offered her the opportunity to envision possibilities for herself and her children, options she thought were unattainable, prior to attending Noel College.
As a gifted/honor student, obtaining good grades and attending college was not an option for Dee. The question for Dee was where, not if, she would attend college. With a mother who was an educator and a father who provided any financial resource necessary for his children’s learning, Dee received a quality education. During her educational trajectory, Dee underwent a process of questioning and negotiating her identities within the various educational institutions she attended. Her personal narrative speaks to the struggles associated with being a high achieving, Black woman attempting to fit within educational environments, and the challenges she encountered from being rejected by some of her Black peers (for not being “Black enough”), and questioned by her White peers (who assumed she was not smart enough).

**Racial Lessons and Educational Attainment: Relocating for Educational Opportunities**

“My mother was the driving force in our education.” As a teacher who worked within the New York City educational system, Dee’s mother was aware of the inequities existing in the school system. As such, Dee’s parents moved to Queens, a suburban borough of New York City, to provide their two daughters with more educational opportunities. “My mom wanted to change our districts because the way the school system works in NYC… My sister would have been in lower level classes with students with behavioral problems… So she decided to move to another district that provided more educational opportunities.” Unlike her sister, who studied in racially and economically diverse schools of NYC, Dee quickly became accustomed to being the only
Black girl in her classes. Unable to remember much of her education prior to their relocation to Queens, Dee recalled being the “only one” in the elementary classroom.

I really don’t remember the first half of elementary school before I made my friends of color. I don’t think I had friends because I was really into reading, so I was like the nerdy one. I kept to myself a lot. I never had any Black friends until I was in the 3rd grade, when this one girl came and then they brought her to me because I was the high achieving, Black person in the class. As a child, the lack of Black faces in the classroom was not an issue of concern for Dee. It was a typical characteristic of the institution that Dee accepted as fact. It was not until Dee began junior high that she seriously began to notice the racial makeup of her peers in the classroom and school. “I went to junior high, I took the bus with Black people, people of color, but they weren’t in my classes because I was in honors classes and many weren’t.” This experience introduced Dee to her first lesson in racial inequality and the educational discrepancy, existing for Black and Latino students in certain districts.

During her commute, Dee attentively listened to the conversations held by students of color on the bus.

I realized everyone knew each other. They shared their stories from lunch because we sat by classes and being in honors classes, I really didn’t relate to them. They would joke on me… They would kind of shit on me. Like I was an Oreo [Black on the outside, White on the inside], but it wasn’t that intense because I got it more from my sister then I got it from them. But at the same time, I had best friends who were really cool, and we weren’t all of the same background, so it wasn’t bad. When I think about it, oh man, I wish I could go back and say some stuff [laughing], but it wasn’t too bad.

Being smart and Black was not a popular combination in Dee’s junior high school. For many of the Black and Latino kids in her school, to be smart and Black meant acting “White” and accepting “White” American norms of interacting, behaving, and speech. Although Dee attempted to ignore such derogatory terms, such as “oreo” (Black on the
outside, white on the inside) and tried to make friends with Black and Latino students (outside of her honors courses), it was difficult because she was unable to relate to their experiences. She had little interaction with them and felt alienated. The irony in this situation is that Dee was praised by her teachers and White peers for her academic excellence but rejected by some Black and Latino peers for not being Black enough or too White. Being teased was not something that Dee readily accepted, but she became accustomed to this treatment because of her sister’s constant racial taunting.

I feel like I am always walking on egg shells around my sister…I feel like I am secure in who I am, but I feel like she has issues being around some White people…She always called me White, and I would feel bad about that… We have definitely gone down different academic paths… She does not understand why I don’t like to learn the newest dances, and I don’t like clubbing. We are just different people, and I think it is our educational experiences and our social experiences.

Dee longed for a better relationship with her older sister where she could share and discuss their social and educational experiences together, but the difference existing between them were far too great. As such, they rarely got along. Nevertheless, Dee still felt a need to have a connection with students of color. Having moved yet again from Queens to Long Island, rather than attend the high school in her community, Dee applied and was admitted to a highly selective and renowned high school in NYC. Although her parents expressed concern about the four hours round trip commute and the potential effect on her grades, Dee’s decision to study at STEM Institute (a pseudonym) had less to do with the academic reputation of the institution and more to do with experiencing something different.

I just did not know the area [Long Island], and it’s always been kind of hard for me to make friends because I am really shy. I also realized these kids have been going to school, because in Long Island it’s like you live in the area, and that is where you go to school. You go to school with the same people from kindergarten
to 12th grade. Sure, some people move in, but it’s mostly the same people… So I don’t know anyone in my neighborhood, and I have lived here for 5, going on 6 years…I also felt it was going to be very different. There was going to be a lot more White people, and I was going to be really uncomfortable, and it’s weird because I went to school with mostly White and Asian people, but for some reason I was just like no more. So I commuted 2 hours going and 2 hrs coming back every day [to attend high school in New York City.

Black and Gifted at STEM Institute

STEM Institute was an ideal place for Dee. With a strong emphasis on science and math, STEM Institute is known for its intellectually gifted blend of culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse students. Oblivious to what it was like to attend a racially diverse institution, Dee was excited about her high school educational experience. She anxiously anticipated being challenged academically and learning from diverse peers. Dee tried to prepare herself for what it would be like to learn with a critical mass of racially diverse students, yet upon her arrival at STEM Institute, Dee realized that the racial composition within her classes was similar to her junior high school.

I was never in class with more than maybe two or three Black students until my senior year… but I feel that I really didn’t question, pay attention to racial differences until I was in high school… Not that I didn’t notice or see racial differences before, but I really couldn’t see how it made people treat me… I just think that as I got more friends of color I gained more perspective on situations of racial inequality.

In light of the lack of racial diversity, STEM Institute still managed to prepare her for the academic rigors of the collegiate environment of Noel College.

According to Dee, most of her teachers at STEM Institute were invested in her education, encouraging and supportive of her learning. “They would often say, ‘We know that you can do better than this,’ and they encouraged me to participate. I guess that was kind of cool because as a student of color, they [teachers] don’t really push Black people
for math and science, but they were trying with me.” The few high school teachers that shaped her academic performance were not only challenging, but encouraging. Dee worked well with teachers who were firm but had a sense of humor. She described her junior high chemistry teacher and her sophomore math teacher as individuals who “lit a fire under me to do well!” They believed in me. They pushed me to be the best, even when I was lazy… Students work hard for someone who they feel cares about what they are doing.” Not to suggest that Dee was not invested in her other classes, but like many students, her level of participation and engagement varied depending on the course material, faculty pedagogy, and her comprehension of course work.

Participation as a Risk at STEM Institute

At STEM Institute I wasn’t that great of a participator. I was one who did all my homework. But even if I have the right answers, I am not really going to raise my hand, unless it’s math because I know that there is always a right answer and a wrong answer. In everything else, there are shades of gray [In elementary school] … I guess I was a nerd. I didn’t care, I was in my books, and I raised my hand for everything. I was like the teacher’s pet…and I don’t know. Somehow after that I thought, I could really be wrong [when I verbally participate]. I didn’t want to take that risk, and so I didn’t… I have a slight perfectionist thing… I don’t want to take the risk…so I don’t participate, unless I feel my answer is correct.

Verbal participation was not an essential component of Dee’s academic career at STEM Institute. Most of her grades were earned through fulfilling homework assignments and performing well on exams. Although Dee realized the value of speaking in class, participating in particular classrooms settings, like English and History left her feeling uneasy. Because of her affinity to math and certain science courses, she spoke, raised her hand, and participated in those classes with ease. “With math, if you follow the logic and the calculations, you will get the right answer.” When she specifically referred to her
experience in the humanities and/or social science classrooms, she referred to participation as a risk, having too much gray area. For Dee, courses like history and economics were subjects that resulted in multiple answers to one issue/problem. The possibility of having more than one answer created much ambiguity for Dee, which resulted in her lack of verbal participation. In addition to this, much of Dee’s discomfort with verbal participation came from her “perfectionist complex,” and her fear of being wrong.

Dee seemed to believe that responding incorrectly or providing the wrong answer would somehow be a reflection of her academic competency/intelligence as one of the few Black women in her honors classes. But a portion of Dee’s uneasiness with speaking emerged from her interaction/relationship with some professors.

In Dee’s case, the professor’s instructional mode of teaching and engaging students was a factor that implicitly impacted her level of participation within the classroom.

I took Economics, and I stopped raising my hand because every time I made the slightest comment, he [the teacher] would knock me down… Like, you know, teachers are supposed to encourage you. He would just like shoot me down… not even part of my answer was correct, and he would get upset,… but I remember I never wanted to participate in that class because he always picked on me… So I switched to another Economics class.

The lack of encouragement and support from this Economics professor made Dee more cautious of her participation in other classes as well. The combination of Dee’s perfectionist complex coupled with her fear of being wrong and consequently stigmatized by her White peers (as ignorant Black woman) led Dee to monitor her behavior, which in turn impacted her voice within the class. However, upon her transition to Noel College,
Dee’s verbal participation within the classroom took on a new significance and purpose with respects to her learning.

Laughter and Discomfort: Coping and Learning Within the Collegiate Classrooms of Noel College

Like many students, Dee’s experience within the collegiate classrooms of Noel varied tremendously. Referring to three distinct courses she was enrolled in at the time, (Statistic, Spanish, and Psychology), Dee explained how each class fostered a different level of participation and engagement.

Statistics was a team-taught class, and it’s necessary for the major… veeryone really cares in the class. They really want you to learn the materials …so my teachers have been on me, because it is a 8:35am class and sometimes I just do not wake up in time and then I see my TA in the cafeteria, and she is just like, “You didn’t hand in that homework. What is going on?” ... So I really don’t talk much in class because I don’t do enough of the reading at times to understand what is going on… In Spanish I participate when I know the answer, and then sometime she would call on me… She tries to get me to speak more, but sometimes I am reluctant because its difficult to learn a new language.

Owning responsibility for her careless behavior, Dee candidly admitted that her lack of academic preparation in Statistics and Spanish led to her inability to verbally participate and understand the course materials thoroughly. Moreover, every class context produced a distinct level of participation and engagement for Dee. In Statistics and Spanish, Dee seldom found herself completely engaged. In courses that specifically dealt with race/racism, Dee grappled with a number of issues.

I never liked talking in this class (laughing) because I feel (pauses to think) I don’t know, I never really thought about race so much before, until I was in that class [Psychology of Racism] and we had our first cross-racial dialogue…I was tired. I came here, and it just blows my mind that people don’t know what racism is. They don’t believe in it, and it frustrates me when I have to talk to some White girl from Wisconsin or something, and she is like, “Really?” and then I realized after I responded that I sounded really angry to the rest of the class, and for a
second I was like, “Oh, man.”… But talking in this class has gotten a little easier, but at the same time, I really don’t want to make them [White peers] feel like I am mad at them because it’s really not their fault society teaches them how to be like that from a young age. So I am not mad at them. I am just mad at the ways things have to be.

The lack of exposure and understanding of race and racism by her White peers left Dee frustrated in this class.

I don’t know if this class is beneficial for us [women of color]. I think it’s more beneficial for White people because a lot of them say, “Wow, I never knew all this.”… I am learning that talking about race with certain people frustrates me, and I don’t know if it bothered me before because I never really talked about race outside of a joking manner.

A great deal of discomfort was generated for Dee in classes that dealt specifically with race. Even though Dee was accustomed to attending predominantly White institutions and being in classes with mostly White students, Noel College functioned to keep Dee on the fringes/outskirts in classes, which also worked at times to alienate her further.

As one of the few women of color in her classes, Dee commented on ignorant remarks made by her “clueless White peers.” Forced to monitor her speech and behavior, so as not to fulfill negative stereotypes or represent the entire Black ethno-racial group, Dee found herself struggling between the stereotypical duality that several Black women experience in academia of being visible and/or rendered invisible in academic settings.

As a Black woman who possessed a racialized and marginalized identity, White peers referred to Dee as the authority on race, when discussions around race and racism emerged in the classroom. Because she was a psychology major who valued the subject matter, Dee was outspoken on various issues and consequently became the center of attention. As such, her personal experiences were interpreted (by her White peers) as the monolithic experience of the entire Black race. This not only infuriated Dee, but her passionate and outspokenness led her White peers to perceive her as aggressive.
“Suddenly here [at Noel College] I am not an Oreo, I am seen as kind of aggressive.” In this case, Dee’s verbal participation and outspokenness not only functioned to keep her in the spotlight in some collegiate classroom settings, but her voice was simultaneously used by some of her White peers to stereotype her as aggressive. However, in courses that did not engage race, racism, or diversity issues, Dee tended to participate less. Much of this silence was attributed to not having such a strong background in the course, boredom with the materials being discussed, listening, and/or at times being ignored. Although it occurred less frequently, Dee noticed that when she made comments or suggestions in science classes, for example, her voice was ignored, undervalued, and/or unrecognized. As such, the collegiate classrooms of Noel College have functioned as a double edge sword for Dee, a space for learning/dialogue and a space for alienation and frustration. As such, to deal with some of the ignorance of her classmates, Dee employed laughter in the classroom as a coping mechanism.

I don’t know, I laugh rather than get upset. That is all you can do. We were watching this film in psychology class and this was before we had our cross-racial dialogue. I forgot the name of the film, but one of the girls in class said, “I don’t understand. We are all Americans. For you to tell me that you think there is racism is that you think it exist. You feel yourself below others. Because you can do anything you want in this country, and this country is not holding you back,” and he said all this stuff. He went on to say, “I have no idea why you would feel like that. It’s totally not true.” And I found myself laughing throughout the whole day. I mean sometimes it is so bad you have to laugh because you can’t get upset all the time…maybe I laugh as so not to cry that this is so messed up. At times, it’s so messed up that I don’t even know what to say, and so I laugh.

Always having to be the one to respond, teach and correct her White peers on issues pertaining to race, laughter became Dee’s viable outlet within the classroom. Laughter allowed Dee not to completely internalize the ignorant comments made by her peers. It
became her way of controlling her physical response and discomfort within the classroom, so as not to offend her White peers.

Noel College Helped Me Value My Education

In the midst of these dynamics, Dee still managed to gain the most from her collegiate experience at Noel. Describing her academic experience as the most valuable aspect of her life, Dee’s collegiate education has not only allowed her to become a more open-minded individual, but she is more critical of issues and conversations. Prior to her experience at Noel College, Dee admitted that her education was important, but the meaning of her education has “changed over time.” Dee’s education has purpose. Much of the value Dee attributes to her education is closely linked to her ability to speak, but also to listen in silence.

The professors, as well as the collegiate settings of Noel College allowed Dee to become more vocal.

Although I am nervous when I speak because I often feel unsure of myself when I am answering, I plan out everything that I will say. That way I have more control and I am not as nervous…But I also listen and gather my thoughts to raise questions. So speaking and silence go hand and hand for me when I learn in the classroom.

Despite the fact that Dee continued to be cautious about speaking in class, she never ceased to underscore the value of verbal participation and silence in her learning.

Jada

Attempting to prioritize her academics while raising three children and being a wife, mother, and student challenged Jada. Constantly on the move, dropping her kids at
school, rushing to meet with study groups, catching up on reading for class, and attending
to household chores was not the ideal situation for Jada, but completing her
undergraduate education was a necessity. Due to her demanding schedule, Jada used any
available moment to advance as much as possible in her academics. Even when Jada and
I met, she was in the process of taking summer classes to advance in her undergraduate
program as a non-traditional student at Noel College. Her educational trajectory, as she
so eloquently described, had been one of disappointment and failure, “I was always
committed to my education, but I lacked the opportunity to receive one.” Jada’s
matriculation at Noel College not only provided her with the opportunity to receive an
education, but she began to question and unpack the negative internalized stereotypes that
shaped much of early childhood education. This self-reflexivity was a huge factor
propelling her towards completing a college degree.

Pushed Through the System: Jada’s Early Educational Experience

Jada began our interview with a firm declaration of her racial identity as a
multiracial, Black woman in the United States. As our conversation developed, it became
clear that much of Jada’s educational experience had been shaped by her lack of
opportunity, which she attributed to structural inequality, her socioeconomic status, and
ethno-racial identity. “I identify as a Black woman. … My mother is White, so I am
conscious and aware of being a multiracial woman, but identifying as Black, shapes who
I am hugely.” Although Jada acknowledged her multiracial identity, within the U.S. racial
classification system, individuals who do not visibly look White are relegated to “other”
and are often treated differently. This was something that Jada was quite familiar with, being treated differently because of her ethno-racial background.

From Jada’s early memories, school was a challenging environment.

The fact that my mother had a 7th grade education, was White with a Black/biracial daughter was not trendy during those times. So my mother was unsupported, and she really put her faith into the educational system because she knew no better, and they failed me and pushed me through when they could…and I was marginalized…I just failed, and I didn’t receive any education.

Although Jada did not understand the complexities of structural inequality and racism as a child, she was a victim of its vicious cycle. Jada’s facial expressions conveyed the struggle and pain of that period in her life as she recalled being placed in special education classes because she was a Black child.

I don’t know if it is tracking kids, is what they were doing, but they had basic, standard, and advanced level classrooms… So I was always in basic classrooms, and it seemed logical because that is where all of the kids of color were. So it made sense. I felt that is where I belonged. The school, its teachers never gave me the sense that I was intelligent or smart or worthy, and I remember feeling that way from very young. Early on in elementary school I was in special education classrooms, but it made sense because I assumed that is where Brown kids belonged, but it was unjust because there was no real reason aside from being a poor Black kid whose family was uneducated. There was nothing wrong with me. I had no learning disabilities that were diagnosed or even diagnosable…I was broken from very young. I assumed and accepted the fact that I was not smart and I assumed and accepted the fact that Brown kids were not smart.

One could argue that this socialization process was one of the reasons Jada lacked the proper skills to complete her postsecondary education. In addition to having no one who could advocate for her, Jada also experienced identity issues. Unable to explain why she felt different, Jada, like many biracial children, felt out of place in the school system.

I was in a really awkward space because on so many levels I identified with Black kids, but because I was the pretty girl with good hair who was light skin, Black girls couldn’t stand me half the time, but I also didn’t identify with the White girls at all…so I think my situation was unique, but I still felt I was marginalized and broken in terms of my confidence and my abilities all through school.
Although Jada remained informed of things in the world (because she feverishly read anything to escape from her reality), the lack of academic foundation and encouragement from teachers made Jada “ill-prepared for school.” The lack of guidance and support from her parents and teachers, coupled with an educational system that socialized Jada to believe and accept that she was undeserving of a quality education, led Jada to experience internalized racism that led her towards a path of self-destruction. As such, Jada began hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting into “stuff” (drugs, alcohol) while she was still very young. Having no afterschool extracurricular activities to keep her preoccupied, Jada became completely disengaged from high school.

I was so overwhelmed that it almost seemed meaningless to go on. I just didn’t even know how to move forward, and other things became equally important in my mind, like my life, and figuring out who I was, and dealing with my home life, and all of that… So I dropped out of high school in 11th grade… I mean I stop attending [that particular school], but I went back and forth to a whole bunch of different high schools. So, I was all over the place. I really have no foundation in terms of my academics.

Jada’s experience speaks to the strong correlation existing between the intentional and systematic tracking of students of color and poor students. Jada believed that the poor quality of education she received was a systemic act of sabotage and keep her and all Black, poor children in a state of ignorance. Realizing that the well being of her children depended on her ability to get an education, Jada got her GED and began her college career online. This eventually led her to take courses at the local community college which led her to apply and eventually to attend Noel College.

I feel like there was always a part of me that wanted to pursue it [her education] in terms of where I wanted to go and where I felt I should be. But I carried that with me, and there were a few moments in my life where people had a profound influence that made me think about college and think that someday maybe that
would be a good idea for me. And I guess my life and my circumstances always left me in a place where I felt like that might be the next logical step.

Two Extremes: Jada’s Collegiate Classroom Experience

When Jada began her academic career at Noel College, she found herself in an awkward space. For the first time in her life, since the age of 16, Jada found herself not working and committing herself to being a full-time student.

I am not working for the first time in my life since I left home, which is a dilemma that I struggle with every single day. On so many levels it’s wonderful, but at the same time heartbreaking and difficult. But I love it, because I feel like I could really do this college thing, which I have wanted to do for a while.

Unable to explain why she felt ambivalent about this situation, one can speculate that as a working-class woman, Jada felt guilty for having the privilege to study full-time while other women in her same position struggled to survive. Nevertheless, she took this opportunity to immerse herself as much as possible with her academics. In doing so, Jada encountered a host of challenges at Noel College, beginning with her academic preparation in certain academic areas.

In the process of fulfilling her general education requirements, Jada realized she was ill-prepared to complete her science requirements. Although Jada successfully completed a few courses in natural sciences at the community college level, she found that at Noel College “it was a whole new level.” She said “I definitely felt ill-prepared… because there were gaps in my education. There is no room for people like myself who are not strong in the sciences, but have an interest in the sciences.” Explaining how it would take her twice as long to prepare for a science class (because of her lack of preparation), Jada eventually gave up her pursuit of a science major and began to major
in Psychology. According to Jada, Noel College is one of those institutions that is known for its rigorous science curriculum.

Because women have been groomed for sciences their whole lives, it comes easier to them. I have gaps in my education, and I have to struggle… Inside the classroom at times I feel like I am on a soapbox while other times I feel ignored. So if I am not being ignored, there is like this emphasis on me because I am the [racially] different person in the classroom. It’s two extremes, but they are related and totally intertwined.

Using the metaphor of a soapbox, Jada discussed how she felt on display in certain classrooms. Although she did not explicitly state what was meant by soapbox, as she described her experience, it was evident that Jada, being the only Black woman in many of her classes, felt like the token. Believing she was selected, by virtue of her ethno-racial identity, to contribute during discussions, Jada felt scrutinized by her peers and professors. At the same time that she found herself in the spotlight, she was also simultaneously ignored. Working within the context of socially privileged, highly educated, White females, as a Black woman, Jada realized the comments she made were readily dismissed/ignored, overlooked, or “unheard.”

It depends on the classroom, my science class, which was a huge class—there was about 100 plus students, and there were a few students that talked in every class, and knew science like it was there birthday… class went really fast, and I just sort of listened, but in lab, I felt unheard, disrespected and that was difficult.

These experiences, in addition to the disrespect she encountered from some students and younger instructors shaped her level of engagement and participation in the classroom.

Learning Within the Classroom: Faculty Development and Student Voice

Like many students, participation was an essential component of Jada’s learning process within the classroom at Noel College.
Participating and getting the information that I need to learn is huge for my understanding of information. I want to be in the classroom. I enjoy it. It [participating] helps me understand…So yeh, I participated a lot in the class, but I felt like I had an odd relationship with some my professors in the class…but I realized that I felt heard when there was a group of us women of color… We all sort of banded together in class.

For Jada, the ability to speak, share her perspectives, and engage in class discussion with other peers was a process of knowledge acquisition and learning. Being able to speak freely in class was a central component of her learning. “I am not young. I am 30 years old. I don’t want to go put my head down and sleep in a classroom or slouch. I am here because I want to be here, so in that respect I need to talk, to participate.” Having women of color in the classroom also seemed to serve as a support mechanism for Jada. One could speculate that when there was a critical mass of women of color in a class, Jada was less likely to be dismissed and more likely to be heard because they could support each other’s ideas/concepts. But Jada also spoke of the value of engaging her real life experience to her course content. Linking her personal experience to the course material was central to her learning, but she also had difficulty sharing and information about her personal background because she knew that fitting in on campus was virtually impossible.

Discussing the importance of class content and faculty pedagogy with respect to her verbal participation, Jada stressed the role of faculty preparation and readiness in relation to her learning. According to Jada, if the class content was monotonous, disinteresting and the faculty were disengaged, she did not put in as much effort. Referring to one professor’s lack of exciting pedagogy and its impact on her learning and engagement, Jada stated the following:
I wasn’t familiar with the material. She was a young professor. I don’t think that she had quite unum figured it all out yet. You know, how to be a professor and how to hear every student and respect every student and question us in a way that encouraged people to ask more questions, and so I just think she was pretty lousy, and I was turned off quickly. So I pushed through it, to get through it.

This type of situation did not occur often at Noel College, but when it happened, Jada spoke of the struggle she experienced in her attempts to stay focused in a class that she was no longer invested or interested in.

It’s not enough to teach students the material, how do you engage them, make the information interesting, force them to speak on the matter? I would encourage dialogue between students because that works for me…The traditional teacher-student relationship prevents the growth on both sides…and so if you [the professor] are like, “Listen to me,” then you prevent me from being the best student that I can be, right? From thinking outside of the box to become critical and a creative thinker, and then you also stunt my growth as a teacher, and if I experience this in a class, I am usually disengaged and don’t speak.

Thus, having a relationship with an instructor that allows for an open exchange of thoughts and discussions, where she can share her thoughts and is respected, created an environment where Jada comfortably participated and spoke with frequency. “Instructors who lacked teaching skills or were too consumed in their research that they themselves become like the book and lose their sense of humility and lose their sense of needing to grow” was yet another factor that forced Jada to shut down and not speak.

Noel College: A Necessity, Not an Option

In her reflection of her academic experience, Jada was very clear to distinguish her experience of the collegiate classrooms of Noel College from the institutional environment. Although the institution was predominantly White and one of the best and rigorous women’s colleges in the U.S., overall Jada’s educational experience at Noel College was what she described as a necessity. “I am in a place in my life where I
understand that I need to do this… It means everything to me… I think it will open doors for me that have been closed…the knowledge that I am gaining being here and studying is what I need to be successful.” The challenges Jada experienced within the classrooms were meaningless compared to the set of competencies she gained. Attending a women’s institution allowed Jada to begin to deconstruct the internalized oppression that shaped much of her early educational experience that impacted her sense of self.

I don’t think I have always received the messages about myself that I am worthy, or that I am incredibly intelligent, or that I can break through barriers…but I am in a place now where I understand that those are false. I understand that there are other things that impact what I receive from the outside world…I am clear about my path. I won’t be steered away from my education regardless of the obstructions that may cross my path!

Becoming more open-minded and critical of information, Noel College taught Jada to be a change agent, to overcome any barriers that come her way. “Noel College has equipped me with the skills to build on the inner strength I always knew I had. It’s just tapping into it, and it sort of grows from there.” Although as a child, racial and economic barriers kept her from receiving the education she warranted, she had taken that injustice and invested her energy in learning as much as possible to be the best for her family.

Vikki

Born in the third largest city of Colombia Vikki, a freshman anthropology major, learned to navigate cultural differences and challenging circumstances at an early age. Using her education as a driving force of transformation, Vikki, a studious and dedicated student, was faced with a fundamental dilemma experienced by most immigrant youths educated in the U.S.—the struggle between remaining loyal to her cultural origins and traditions or immersing herself in American culture (Americanization). Nowhere did this
A Mother’s Absence: Family Unity and Support

Raised in humble beginnings within a working-class community of Colombia, Vikki and her sister never went without. Between her grandparents, uncle, and aunt, Vikki and her sister attended quality schools and lived comfortably in a modest home. Her grandfather was an artist who made his living as a carpenter and selling artwork. Her uncle also followed in his father’s footsteps and was a carpenter as well. Vikki did not share much about her grandfather and uncle, only to say that they were affectionate and incredibly overprotective of her. On the other hand, Vikki’s grandmother and aunt were not typical traditional Colombian women, who solely cared for the private domestic affairs of the family. According to Vikki, her grandmother and aunt had a work ethic and level of independence that was rarely seen among Colombian women at the time. They challenged the status quo of the gendered division of labor within a machista (masculine) Colombian society.

My grandmother was the working type. She didn’t like the idea of being a housewife or staying at home. She always worked, and it’s not like she was not allowed to because of the economic situation of the family. So she had to work to make a living… My aunt, now she was a business woman. She began selling cell phones and now she’s selling houses. She had her own office. She was also a manager and was promoted all the time in the company. She is a very strong...
woman, determined. Everyone listened to her, even the men...who do have the power. The men are the working type. But when I saw my aunt, she was superior, you know. And I always loved it!

As her role models, Vikki’s aunt and grandmother taught her to express her thoughts and opinions openly, without fearing backlash from boys and men. Vikki was encouraged to be creative and independent, to respectfully speak her mind and disagree with differing perspectives. Much of her classroom interactions with peers and teachers stemmed from the lessons learned from her grandmother and aunt. Unable to remember explicit details about her childhood relationship with her mother, much of what Vikki recalled was information provided to her as an adult.

As a young child, Vikki would see her mother sporadically. “I don’t quite remember, but there was a period of time where my mother wasn’t there, and I just had my grandmother, aunt, and uncle to take care of me.” Her mother would travel back and forth from the United States. “She said she could not be away from me for so long,” but her mother never stayed a long period of time. Although Vikki had the love and support of her extended family, she struggled with the absence of her mother. At a later age, Vikki understood that her mother’s absence was attributed to the pursuit of higher education and financial stability. Vikki’s mother went to the United States to pursue her college degree and work to assist the family through financial hardship. “She basically wanted to get out of Colombia because things were getting bad, and she wanted us to live here [in Colombia] until things got financially better.” Ultimately, Vikki and her sister immigrated to the United States to join their mother. Prior to this major cultural shift, Vikki acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in U.S. American schools through her interesting educational foundation in Colombia.
From Catholic School to Home Schooling:
Challenging Traditional Educational Norms for Self-Expression

Vikki began her formative education in one of the best American Catholic schools for girls. Although Vikki admitted that she was never the school type, she did very well academically. Having a photographic memory, Vikki was able to visually remember material she had read and lesson plans taught days and months earlier “I did not really listen sometimes, but I could still remember what I learned, they [teachers] wrote it on the board.” Because she struggled to listen and stay focused in the classroom, Vikki strategically sat in the front of the class to pay attention. In addition to the traditional disciplines of science, math, and history, learning English was part of the educational curriculum as well. Learning and speaking English was exciting for Vikki, as she always thrived from challenging and interesting courses. But practicing religious teachings and reciting daily prayers became a problem for Vikki. As part of the institutional curriculum, religious studies was a requirement. Considering Vikki could never relate to religion, she found herself challenging the religious institutional beliefs that were imposed on her.

Colombia, like many Latin American countries, has a significantly larger portion of practicing Catholic/Christian followers. Although Vikki was raised within the Catholic faith, her family was never devout Catholics. In school, Vikki was required to pray daily, “When there were nuns at school, they would get mad at me because I would not pray…I never related to religion and its beliefs…I do believe in God, but I didn’t like people telling me what I should believe.” Sharing her anger and discomfort about forced prayer with her grandmother, her grandmother supported her self-expression and ability to challenge institutional beliefs. “You know it’s ok. You don’t have to believe what they believe. You don’t have to believe in the Bible. You don’t have to feel bad because you
feel different.” Vikki’s indifference towards the institution’s religious practices was one contributing factor that led to her home schooling. Another factor that contributed to Vikki’s home schooling was her sudden awareness of class difference.

I was sitting in the school bus with my friend, and this is where I saw the difference in class. I remember the school bus was dropping everyone off, and I saw that we had arrived at this beautiful, beautiful clean, like really spotless neighborhood where the houses were huge. They were mansions and white. It was like they were painted white, and there were girls that were coming off the bus and going into these houses. And I was like, “What?” [laughing] I questioned, “Where did all of this come from?” And she asked me, “Well, don’t you live around here?” and I was like, “No. I live near the last bus stop.” Actually it wasn’t really my neighborhood. I was picked up by my aunt on her motorcycle in that neighborhood. I didn’t take the bus in the morning, so I never knew until I was on the bus for the first time that there was that difference, you know. And then everyone started finding out that I lived somewhere else…so that was a little kind of disappointing…I got used to the idea that I was lower class. I just felt comfortable in my place. There is no need to like, want something else. But people started talking, and you are young, and you feel bad, plus they found out that I was not from their neighborhood, and it was a Catholic school, and so I could never relate to religion…so I think that is part of why I didn’t want to continue going there. And so my grandmother was like, “Ok, that is fine, I will get you a teacher; you will be home schooled.” So I was home schooled for a year, before I left to the United States.

As an impressionable child, Vikki was not only surprised with the extravagant homes and the enormous amount of wealth, but she was also embarrassed by her own class status. Although she did not quite understand the socioeconomic politics of the haves and the have nots, she realized she was different from the majority of her classmates. By remaining on the bus, until its final destination, Vikki revealed her distinct class status to her classmates. She became a marker of class difference, and with the insensitive nature of many children, she was teased. As such, one could speculate that her grandmother’s decision to remove her from the private school and allow her to be home schooled was based on her love and protection of Vikki. The fact that Vikki’s mother was not readily present during her childhood could have potentially been another reason she allowed
Vikki to be home schooled. Overall, Vikki’s commitment to learning and studying increased with her home schooling experience.

It was amazing. It was the best time. From all those years of going to school and not learning anything because I hated school, that one year I learned everything. I became more articulate in Spanish, in literature, and in English. I didn’t really like English, but she was a really great teacher, mentor, and friend… I can’t remember too much specificities, but I do remember it was a good time for me.

The most important aspect of learning that Vikki acquired from her home school instructor was to be comfortable and, more importantly, to enjoy her education. Vikki made it quite clear that she disliked school. Considering that her previous educational experience was not the best, Vikki’s home school instructor worked with getting Vikki to enjoy her learning and to value her education. Instead of starting with the traditional disciplines of math and science, Vikki’s instructor taught her how to read, understand, and listen to music. Although Vikki never explained why her instructor chose music as the lesson of choice to begin Vikki’s home schooling education, Vikki became a fervent follower of music. Vikki’s enthusiasm towards learning music influenced her performance in her other disciplines as well.

We started with music, a little recorder and just learned the notes…I have always liked music, but I really appreciate learning. I always questioned, “How do they make music? How do they play it?” So once she told me, I was like, “This person is amazing. She knows her stuff,” and I accepted her. I became very open with her through music and everything, and then we got into math. I would say I was always good in math. So it was a pretty easy topic, and then we got into literature, which is not my strongest, but she was the poetic type. So she taught me poems, showed me the meanings behind the poems and why people wrote the poems, and she also encouraged me to make my own understanding of the poems.

Through this educational experience, learning became enjoyable for Vikki. She became dedicated to learning new materials, reading, and asking questions. Her home schooling
experience in fact provided Vikki with the necessary skills to maneuver the U.S. academic classrooms when she arrived in the United States.

From Columbia to the United States:
Education and the Micro, Meso, Macro Levels of Racial Consciousness

The transition from Colombia to the state of Connecticut was a challenging experience for Vikki. Arriving to the United States at the tender age of 8 with her younger sister, Vikki was forced to undergo a process of educational and cultural adaptation. This process began for Vikki within the U.S. school system.

Vikki began her education in the United States in the 4th grade. Although she had papers indicating that she belonged in fifth grade, Vikki was retained due to her lack of English speaking skills and grammar. Placed in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, Vikki managed to learn English in one year.

The teacher and mentor that I had in elementary school that taught me English was British, and she allowed me to feel comfortable learning English. It was very easy to transition into this country because of her, I think… but when I started middle school, I had to learn American grammar and American words. So that was yet another task… I practiced English a lot, and I had to almost get rid of my accent. I didn’t hear an accent, but people would tell me that I had a little bit of an accent. So it kind of bothered me that I had a little bit of an accent, and I wanted to get rid of it, and so I really wanted to work on it, but through middle school and elementary school, I was not permitted to take English classes yet. People did not believe me in 7th and 8th grade that I was in ESL classes. They thought I was in an English class because I was able to get rid of my accent, and I was able to speak like they [Americans] spoke. But I was mad because they [teachers/school administrative regulations] weren’t allowing me to get out of the ESL class.

In an effort to help Vikki develop proficiency in English, school administrators required Vikki to enroll in mandatory ESL classes. As a student with limited English proficiency, Vikki felt pressure to perfect her English through eliminating her accent. Although Vikki did not divest from her cultural roots, one could speculate that in her attempts to adapt to
a new country and culture she believed perfecting her English speaking skills through eliminating her accent was imperative to her academic success. Because many U.S. schools have adapted to inculcating English as a method of integrating minorities into the mainstream American culture Vikki often felt as an outsider.

In elementary school they saw me as a foreign kid. In middle school 6th and 7th grade I was still the foreign kid, but when I was in 8th grade, I was one of them [an American]. No more外国er, you speak English now. You know our culture now because I dress like them… I got into the real culture.

Only after Vikki was recognized as an American (rather than a foreigner in American society) could she see her opportunity for growth and educational advancement.

Raised in a family that valued education and social progress, Vikki believed that educational advancement was the only way individuals reached their full potential in society. As such, Vikki’s commitment to learning intensified in high school.

In high school I was already into my classes, like my peers weren’t, but I was motivated to learn and learn more. This time, I liked going to school. People thought I was weird because they asked me, “How can you like school?” I preferred to be in school than at home… In 9th grade I really, really, really paid attention to learning, paid attention to my future, paid attention to my grades… Like now that I am in high school I have to worry about getting good grades so I can get into college.

While Vikki attended high school, she was enrolled in honors classes throughout her four years and continued to excel academically. During this time, however, Vikki commented on seeing more racism and separation of people in high school than she could have ever imagined.

As an immigrant and first-generation student, Vikki had never been exposed to U.S. racism. Vikki’s first lesson in racial difference occurred within her family. According to Vikki, her family’s ethno-racial composition was like a typical Colombian citizen.
I am 100% Colombian. I am not mixed… but my side of the family, I am guessing my ancestors were from Europe, from what my grandfather and grandmother said… That is why my family is kind of lighter… So in Colombia, not only did I not look like anyone, but I was more isolated because of that. I was called Gringa, which means you’re American. You’re a White person…and so I felt different, even though I wasn’t treated differently.

Although there is much ethno-racial diversity in Colombia and a large population of Afro-Colombians, Vikki was not exposed to that racial diversity. Instead, she overheard negative remarks from certain family members about Blacks and Black Colombians/Afro Colombians. As such, Vikki was also influenced by the negative racial construct and stereotypes of Blacks.

Coming to school here [in the U.S.], it was very multiracial. First, I was introduced to many people I have never seen. Like all these races… In Colombia we have, Latin, but we also have Black people, but you rarely see those people from where I was from…For me, I saw them as people, even though they are a little bit different. Obviously, I know about difference [laughing]… My grandma is a little racist though. But not the racist that people would associate with her. It’s the stereotype kind of racist. Like you know, she would say, “Those Black people can’t speak very well.” So that is the kind of thing. She won’t say it out loud. She would call them Negros [Black in Spanish], and she would put them down. But I did not realize that she had those thoughts until I changed my views…I would say to her, “Why do you describe them like that?” She never spoke like this in Colombia because they weren’t around. It’s not like she doesn’t have family herself that is Black. For some reason, here [in the United States] it [Black] became an issue. Here, it [Black/being Black] became obvious.

Studying in the United States not only exposed Vikki to racial diversity and different groups of people, but she began to gain a racial consciousness grounded in a U.S. historical perspective of inequality and racial injustice of Black and indigenous peoples. With her increased awareness, Vikki began to understand why many of her instructors would say the following statement in class, “Everyone is equal and no matter what color or gender you are, everyone is equal.” This racial consciousness also led her to question and challenge her grandmother’s racist views as well.
Gaining a deeper understanding of racial difference and inequalities did not necessarily interfere with Vikki’s academic progress. In fact, Vikki was not concerned with the lack of students of color in her honor’s classes. She noticed the lack of racial diversity, but she dismissed it as misfortune. Instead, Vikki found herself unintentionally separating from Latino and Black students who were not in honors classes.

Like I did not want to associate with them, but it wasn’t intentional. Like I was almost separating myself from them because they were not as smart as I am or there are not taking the same classes as I am… It was like unconscious, and I never really thought about it until she [her teacher] told me [that they were a privileged group of students that are not only special but fortune to take AP and Honors classes]… like I realized the Hispanics, the Blacks, the minorities I wasn’t part of them. And that is the thing, I could go into their group [ethno-racial group], but they can’t come into my group [honor class].

Vikki’s sense of entitlement prevented her from having more friends of diverse ethno-racial backgrounds. The fact that she was one of the few Latinas in honor classes did not affect her academic performance; instead, she was much more vocal. “I just loved talking a lot and that is what I did in class…which encouraged other people to talk…in high school I got to discuss everything, not just accept it, but discuss it.” Her ability to freely engage in dialogue/discussion with peers and professors was an essential skill she utilized regularly at Noel College.

Driven Towards Educational Success:
Group Representation vs. Individual Experience at Noel College

Attending Noel College was one of the most important accomplishments Vikki had achieved. As a freshmen anthropology major, Vikki truly enjoyed being in the classroom and learning new material. Engaging her peers in discussion and interacting with professors were just a few reasons she took pleasure in taking social science classes.
I participate a lot in my classes. Actually I talk a lot in this class [in philosophy]. In all these classes, I can tell you I am sitting right in the front. So I am always constantly one on one with the teachers. So that is great! ... I feel like I am involved, and I have a connection with the teacher as well.

For the most part, there is nothing that Vikki would not ask within the classroom. For Vikki, the classroom functions as a space for experimentation where students learn by asking questions and say what is truly on their minds. With her excitement for learning and self-confidence, Vikki never envisioned that she would engage in self-silencing within the academic classroom that she exceedingly enjoyed.

Vikki’s Silence and Voice:
A Different Academic and Cultural Environment

To say Vikki engaged in silence was atypical. Vikki was a student that was constantly immersed in her course work.

Discussing, explaining things, and asking questions was the best way to demonstrate to the professor that I was listening, that I was participating… Speaking, participating is something that I do. I would put it on my resume or something, not really [laughing]… but it is very important to me because that is how I learn. That is how I acquire my knowledge… But I would consider myself a very good listener too… but I am not a shy person, and I don’t get embarrassed easily, and so that is the kind of participation I do.

As an active participant in all her classes, Vikki thrived when she challenged students and professors alike. However, within her psychology class, Vikki experienced a discomfort associated with the sense of representing one’s race/culture. For the first time in her educational experience, Vikki felt that her peers and professor generalized and claimed to already know all about Latinos, as if all Latinos were the same.

During her organizational group psychology class, Vikki and her classmates read a number of articles about Asian American, Caribbean, Anglo American, and Latin
American cultural perspectives and group dynamics. During this lecture/discussion, Vikki’s psychology professor made reference to the ways in which diverse cultures are different but share a particular perspective because they pertain/belong to the same ethno-racial group. In other words, if an individual belonged to an Asian ethno-racial group, individuals in that cultural group will most likely have the same cultural views on issues. This concept created much anxiety for Vikki.

So, I feel like anything I say might, well she might say it’s because you are looking at it from Latin American perspective, but I don’t think that should be a factor… It almost feels like I don’t want to say something because it might seem to her as my Latin American perspective. But I don’t want it to seem like that and maybe I should have not taken the class because I am very individualistic.

The uneasiness that Vikki experienced at the thought that every word, perspective argued, or comment uttered might be understood by her peers and professors as a representation of her entire ethno-racial group led Vikki to purposely engage in silence within that class.

That does not keep me from speaking, even though there is this kind of background like a nudge of ‘Don’t say really anything.”… But I still do it. I still participate, if you silence me at that moment, you won’t silence me throughout the whole class experience.

Even in her other courses, Vikki became more mindful of the remarks she made in class so as not to represent “a Latin American perspective.” This issue of representing one’s race/culture within the classroom also led Vikki to discuss her bicultural identity as a Colombian American woman. “I have evolved into two cultures. I have merged into two cultures, and I no longer have my Latin American culture, but I also have the American culture so I see things differently and this helps me speak more.” The fact that Vikki chose to negotiate her Colombian and American cultures, instead of rejecting or assimilating into one or the other, created a sense of self-confidence that enables her to participate without feeling that she was representing her Latin American culture.
When I participate it’s not that I know that I am correct, it’s either to support an idea or theory that might be good to discuss in class… I like participating because I learn, but when I don’t there is a purpose for not participating. Often times I am listening to the discussion and learning from that. I am never silent just for the sake of being silent.

The First Choice

Overall, Vikki attributes much of her learning and academic success to the institutional commitment of Noel College in providing the best educational quality and resources for women. “Being here, it’s like you are learning and you’re just having fun. You are able to relate to other women from everywhere around the world. I love to learn, and I just like being focused.” Being at a women’s institution has been the best experience for Vikki. In fact, her commitment to learning and research increased so much that she seeks to attend graduate studies in Anthropology to continue her passion of culture, society, and diverse group dynamics.

Summary

Nine profiles were created to provide a synopsis of the lived experience of the participants. Highlighting the different-similarities (Lorde, 1995) in their lives was important to emphasize to show how Black women and Latinas are not a monolithic group. As culturally and economically marginalized groups in the United States, Black women and Latinas continue to experience similar struggle against racial inferiority. Their socialization process (first experienced through their families and later reinforced through institutional and cultural systems) forced Black women and Latinas participants to engage voice and silence in a particular way within the collegiate classroom. In
Chapter 5, the findings will illustrate in thematic form an explicit description of how participants understand and experience their voice and silence.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS

The purposes of this study are: 1) to understand how Black women and Latinas experience and make meaning of their collegiate classroom experiences within a women’s college, 2) to examine how the dynamic collegiate classroom can serve to hinder and or encourage voice and silence among Black women and Latinas, and 3) to provide faculty with important information about the distinct oral communication patterns/behaviors employed by Black women and Latinas. As such, this study serves to place the academic experience of Black women and Latinas at the center of analysis to examine if the complexities of voice and silence impact their academic experience as student learners. The following research questions guided this study:

- How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in collegiate classrooms?
- What meanings do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence?
- What do Black women and Latinas perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence?

This chapter highlights the common themes that illustrate how Black women and Latina participants experience and understand their voice and silence. Drawing on the extensive data generated from each of the nine participants, this chapter begins with an examination of their pre-collegiate experience with voice and silence, followed by an assessment of their collegiate experience with the phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, pre-collegiate refers to the social, educational and lived experiences participants
shared prior to their matriculation to college and collegiate experience refers to their contemporary college experience.

When examining their pre-collegiate experience, one of the principle findings of this study, *linguistic habitus of Black women and Latinas*, illustrates how family, culture and larger societal context impacts voice and silence of participants. As a product of their linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), Black women and Latina participants developed a *raw tongue*, a form of communication based on the behaviors and linguistic patterns learned from family and social communities. Their raw tongue was so pervasive during their pre-collegiate experiences because that is the only form of linguistic expressions and exchanges that participants were familiar with. Unlike voice, *silence* was attributed to learning and knowledge acquisition in high school, rather than dispositions acquired through socialization with family and social communities. However, when discussing their collegiate experience, a major shift in how participants understood and experienced their voice and silence occurred.

To provide an overall understanding of how voice and silence differed for Black women and Latina participants in collegiate classrooms, this study begins with a description of the theme, *bitter sweetness of collegiate classrooms* which highlights the challenges encountered by participants in collegiate classrooms that impacted their voice and silence. In discussing their contemporary collegiate experiences, three distinguishing features of voice emerged for participants’, instrumental voice, raw tongue and symbolic voice. The themes, *instrumental voice, raw tongue and symbolic voice* exemplify the fluid and multidimensional aspect of voice for Black and Latinas participants in collegiate classroom. As this study will illustrate, instrumental voice is expressed as a
manifestation of the academic student behavior in collegiate classrooms. Raw tongue for participants was described as real/authentic voice that was connected to their culture and ethno-racial identity. Symbolic voice is the right of participants to speak and be heard. It is a political voice that allows participants to speak as empowered subjects. As for the silence experienced by participants, all participants agreed that silence is inherent in their learning as college students, but interesting distinctions emerged in collegiate classrooms that will be discussed in the final theme, *silence(s)*. Thus, it is important to note that voice and silence for the participants was not simply the right or refusal to speak. This chapter will illustrate how voice and silence was a multidimensional phenomenon that was loaded with meaning for participants.

**The Linguistic Habitus of Black Women and Latinas**

One cannot understand the phenomenon of voice and silence for Black women and Latinas without examining the family and social communities (e.g., friends, church, work, community centers) of their pre-collegiate experience. The social institution of the family and community were central factors for the participants of this study that shaped their linguistic utterances, voice, and communicative patterns/behaviors within elementary and high school.

The communicative patterns employed by participants during their pre-collegiate educational experience were direct reflections of their home/social environments. The socialization process that began at home with parents and was further supported by social institutions, shaped the voice of Black women and Latina participants. For instance, the communicative relationship within Eve’s household consisted of a violent, chaotic,
abusive and belligerent pattern existing within the family. Even though Eve did not utilize these communicative forms, when she spoke at home, it was usually to protect herself from physical and mental abuse imposed by her parents and older sibling. Because she lacked a responsible adult to speak on her behalf in school matters, Eve was forced to develop a voice that allowed her to advocate for herself.

After meeting with a family friend, about my education she told me, “You are not going to a public school for high school.” She introduced me to this woman and she told me about this college preparatory school… A few weeks later I took the placement test and started applying for scholarships… About a month later I received an acceptance letter with all expenses covered… I remember jumping for joy because I did that all by myself. I filled out all the application forms, made sure I had rides for the test and interviews and everything. I completed the scholarship and financial forms without any help. I knew if I wanted to get out of this situation, I had to do this on my own. (Eve)

Unlike Eve’s chaotic household, Vikki and Violeta were encouraged from a young age to question and be outspoken Latinas. According to Vikki, “Family and friends always encouraged me and told me to go beyond what everyone else around me was doing in school… My grandmother was the working type and didn’t like the idea of being a housewife. She and my aunts were very strong, outspoken women… Grandma always asked what I was thinking. She pushed me to be the best and so I always wanted to be the best. So I always asked questions. Why do we do this? Why are we learning?” (Vikki). Violeta also expressed receiving an enormous amount of support from her family. “My parents always engaged us in conversations, at the dinner table, in the living room. Important conversations and decisions were made as a family. I always had the opportunity to share my thoughts.” The encouragement and support Vikki and Violeta received from their families allowed them to question and seek answers without fear of reprisal. “I felt comfortable to ask questions and comfortable to come to them [parents] if
something didn’t make sense” (Vikki). Because both Vikki and Violeta were socialized at an early age to speak and ask questions, expressing their voice in public settings was second nature to them.

Issy, who was raised in a traditional religious Mexican American family, was never encouraged to speak. From an early age, girls in her culture were taught not to speak too much, or talk back and/or ask questions.

Within the church, it wasn’t encouraged to talk and ask questions, and if you questioned, something was wrong with you. So you needed to always be submissive especially because I am a woman. I needed to be submissive, to my father, my brothers, and my pastor. (Issy)

As such, Issy learned to speak less in elementary school because she was manifesting behaviors and values learned from parents, relatives, and church elders. She rarely asked questions and rarely engaged her teachers. This gradually changed in high school with the encouragement of high school teachers who challenged and pushed her to think critically. As these examples illustrate, the process of socialization provided the frame by which Black women and Latina participants were able to experience the self and identify with the values of their immediate community. Whether the participants described themselves as outspoken or more reserved within their family, in classrooms, and other public spaces, these women expressed, what Dalis called “rawness” or what I deem to be a “raw tongue,” a product of their linguistic habitus.

Raw Tongue in High School

Rawness/Raw tongue builds from Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of “a home tongue.” Home tongue refers to a type of language/dialect spoken in the company of sisters, brothers, friends and community (Anzaldúa, 1987). Anzaldúa’s home tongue is
a language which they [women/people of color] can connect their identity to. One capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español, ni ingles, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages. (p. 55)

In this case, the raw tongue of participants was as much a product of their multiple identities as it was a process of socialization rooted in family and community values.

Regardless of the socioeconomic background and cultural/ethno-racial makeup of their families/communities, each woman was socialized to speak and interact with individuals (within their family, community members, and friends) utilizing a raw tongue. Raw tongue is a mixed, fluid dialect. It is neither proper Spanish nor Standard English. Their raw tongue consists of an English slang, working-class English, Ebonics/Black English, or Spanglish. It is a language/dialect that is real untrained, honest, full of emotions, passion, and often filled with hostility/anger. It is a language/dialect that grounded these women in their families, social communities, and their (multiple) ethno-racial/social identities. It is a language that developed from the intersections of race, class, and gender in the lives of these women. Raw tongue is a synergy of cultures that is literally manifested in language. It is a by-product of their linguistic habitus. When Black women and Latina participants used their raw tongue in public spaces of school/work, there was no filtering of words or modification of speech; they spoke in the vernacular of their family/community. They spoke in an authentic voice that required no code switching and was rooted in their lived experiences. It was typical for these women to speak in a raw tongue in high school settings because many of them attended schools in their communities, where people from similar socioeconomic backgrounds looked like them and spoke like them. Teachers who embraced and supported diversity seemed to have created learning environments that promoted the practice of their raw tongue. Most
of the participants never questioned their communicative patterns, behaviors, expressions, or interactions during their primary and secondary educational experiences. Eve, Kimora, Issy and Violeta specifically spoke of social and academic programs that allowed them to freely express their raw tongue.

In high school, Eve’s enthusiasm and commitment towards learning propelled her to engage with students and to seek assistance from teachers without any hesitation.

I was excited because this was different… I can finally talk to people about what is important to me, and they are interested regardless of what I say or how I say it… all my teachers really wanted me to learn things, and I got really excited when I was asking questions and coming in for office hours. (Eve)

According to Eve, her teachers and peers allowed her to feel comfortable to engage and to ask questions frequently. Eve never expressed the need to modify or change her tone/voice because her peers and teachers were overwhelmingly White. She continued to ask questions and to engage her peers. Unlike Eve who attended a private, overwhelming White high school, Kimora, Issy, and Violeta, who attended diverse high schools in their respective communities, also spoke of nurturing educational environments that allowed them to freely express their raw tongue in classrooms.

According to Kimora, discussions in classrooms encouraged creativity and self-expression, regardless of the language/dialect employed.

I think that is one of the things that I loved the most about that school… It was really family-oriented, and it was so small that everyone knew each other, and I think this is one of the things that I loved most about the school… This one teacher was instrumental in getting me out of that awkward stage. She encouraged me and helped me build confidence… You really want someone who can help you academically, for this is the time that you are preparing for college. You don’t want to be around someone that can’t help you. (Kimora)

Violeta also spoke of teachers who motivated her learning and creativity.
High school was such a family kind of feeling, which I loved… It was such a unit, you could go up to the professors. You could hug them. You could joke with them… I could probably say overall all my teachers were great except one… but they all wanted us to learn and ask questions about everything and anything” (Violeta).

Issy’s reference to her teacher interactions and the positive impact on raising her self-confidence was central to her participation and learning within classrooms.

It was a very encouraging environment, and they [teachers] made us work hard. Since the beginning of freshmen year, there was always college being talked about… It was college, college, college, which is why you built this confidence… that you can make it into college… So I felt comfortable coming to a teacher. I felt comfortable asking them to stay with me after class to study for exams. I felt comfortable speaking and asking questions in class because they cared for me. (Issy)

With their supportive teachers and nurturing academic environments that encouraged and fed their learning, Eve, Kimora, Violeta, and Issy comfortably employed their raw tongue. None of the women spoke of being alienated or ostracized in their high school classrooms for speaking differently or having diverging views. Moreover, these environments seemed to embrace diversity and encourage student participation and engagement between students and teachers. Unlike the aforementioned women, Yoli, Jada, Dalis, Dee and Vikki had a distinct educational trajectory that forced them to use their raw tongue differently.

Having dropped out of high school to eventually complete their GED and attend community college, Yoli and Jada spoke of tremulous educational experiences where their raw tongue was not just a pervasive act of communicating with family and friends; it was a tool of survival.

It’s being able to say certain things [in the classroom] and not allow my emotions to get in the way to the point where you want to curse people out. Because where I come from, I will just go off…I come from a very angry background, like seriously. I used to fight a lot to survive. You know, my mom was abused, so it
was an intense childhood that I had, and I grew up very aggressive. So I have to
learn to control my emotions but also say what I am thinking. That is the only
way I know how to be. (Yoli)

I have been living on my own and raising myself my whole life. I left home at 14,
and I am still here [alive]. I have been in really abusive relationships, and I am
still here [alive]. I say what needs to be said regardless of how I may sound to
others. It is how I express myself. (Jada)

Because Yoli and Jada were raised in challenging environments, both women learned to
develop and employ a raw tongue that was more assertive to survive and protect
themselves from harm. Although, Yoli and Jada employed their raw tongue with relative
ease, Dee, Dalis, and Vikki’s experience remind us that many students continue to
receive implicit and explicit social cues from teachers and student peers that their
voice/raw tongue was problematic.

Depending on the class, my tone changed…I got more comfortable with the
teacher. Even though my teacher was White, she was really just excited to have so
many people in her class…but I still felt I had to say things differently. I don’t
really know why. (Dee)

This particular incident forced Dee to be cognizant of her “tone” and voice during
interactions with instructors and students. Although Dee’s experience with her teacher
was encouraging, she nonetheless felt the need to alter her voice to be heard. Unlike Dee,
Dalis and Vikki actually received explicit verbal and social cues from high school
teachers on their limited and improper use of English.

I was never motivated by my teachers, and in fact, I was just another stereotype,
another Puerto Rican girl who didn’t speak English well. “That didn’t sound
right! You speak too Ghetto!”... So I struggled a lot… I wanted to exemplify what
was intelligence, so I yearned for it [standard English], and I heard how people
spoke [standard] English, and I liked it. (Dalis)

While Dalis spoke of the internal struggles to be an intelligent young woman, she
maintained her raw tongue in high school and she continued to speak in raw tongue
because that is all she knew. Vikki, on the other hand, worked on immersing herself as much as possible into Standard English language/American culture by eliminating her accent, so as not to be perceived as different within classrooms. Teachers forced Vikki to take a number of ESL/language immersion programs to learn Standard English and English Grammar. Constantly being corrected by teachers, Vikki was ambivalent and ashamed of speaking in her raw tongue. “It kind of bothered me that I had a little bit of an accent, and I wanted to get rid of that, and so I really wanted to work on it…I finally got to a point where I was able to speak the way they [Americans] spoke.” These experiences forced Dalis and Vikki to become more aware of their linguistic usage and verbal interactions in public spaces.

Eve, Jada, Violeta, Yoli, Dee, Kimora, and Issy never received explicit cues that Standard English was essential to their academic success and necessary in classroom spaces. The raw tongues that these women developed were able to flourish in classroom environments with nurturing and supportive teachers that encouraged confidence and valued diversity. Whether they were in classrooms or other public spaces Eve, Issy, Jada, Kimora, Violeta, Dalis and Yoli continued to voice their perspectives without any hesitation or attempts to alter their speech. They spoke directly and truthfully in their raw tongue and clearly articulated what they felt, thought and desired with ease. Although Dee and Vikki modified their voice in classrooms, they continued to employ their raw tongue in family and community settings. All these women possessed a strong ethno-racial sense of self (i.e., being Puerto Rican, Mexican American, African American) that grounded them in their cultural heritage and shaped their linguistic habitus, their raw
tongue. However, when Black women and Latinas referred to their silence in high school settings, discussing silence was more complicated.

Silent in High School

A common occurrence expressed by Black Women and Latinas in this study was that their silence had more to do with discomfort attributed to learning and knowledge acquisition, than a lack of linguistic capital (as Bourdieu’s theoretical argument suggested) or was a by-product of oppression and/or resistance (as Anzaldúa, 1987; 1990; Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; hooks, 1989; 1994; Hurtado, 1996). When Dalis experienced any level of discomfort within the classroom, she disconnected and engaged in silence. “I disassociated myself from things when I didn’t understand them, let’s say a math problem. As oppose to asking for help or taking on the challenge, I kind of pushed it away and almost put it out of my mind. I didn’t engage with it. It was easier to stay quiet” (Dalis). Similarly, Kimora and Issy spoke of their lack of academic preparation leading to their silence within classrooms. “I didn’t speak and participate much in class because I couldn’t read properly” (Kimora). “I experience some difficulty reading and writing... My academics wasn’t as strong as I would have liked, and so that made things academically challenging. So I didn’t know what to do and say things many times” (Issy). It was not clear whether the silence they employed in high school classrooms resulted from dispositions learned from their families and communities. For the few women who made reference to silence within the private realm of their families, like voice, it appeared to be loaded with distinct meaning and varied by cultural/social context. For example, as a child and young adult, Issy was encouraged to be silent and not to question. “I was told,
“If you question, something is wrong with you. You need to be submissive to your father and pastor, especially because I am a woman.” Silence for Issy was a by-product of the machista (male dominated) Mexican culture and religious community she was raised in. Kimora also made reference to a silence that stemmed from familial and cultural foundations. Raised within a religious household, Kimora was socialized with a belief that “you speak [only] when you are spoken to.” It was a silence, based on respect for elders and religious doctrines. Thus, for Issy and Kimora silence stemmed from cultural beliefs and gender socialization based on informal training at home.

Summary

The voice that Black Women and Latinas participants manifested, during their early education, could be described as a raw tongue resulting from their linguistic habitus. Their raw tongue was an intersectional voice resulting from the connection of race, class, and gender in their lives. Whereas some participants had cultural/societal boundaries imposed on them to contain and/or control their verbal expressions, others were encouraged to fully express their creativity and voice.

Teachers who respected ethno-racial and linguistic diversity were more likely to support and encourage participants to practice their raw tongue in high school classrooms. The fact that these women also shared a working-class socioeconomic background seemed to be another factor that further encouraged their use of a raw tongue within classrooms. With respect to silence, very few participants spoke of silence and how it was experienced within their family life. As such, it was difficult to deduce or definitively state that the silence experienced in early educational classroom
environments was a result of the dispositions learned from family and social communities. The silence employed in secondary classroom environments was linked to their learning and knowledge acquisition more so than a lack of linguistic capital or an expression of resistance and/or oppression. It was not until participants entered the collegiate classrooms of Noel College that they began to think of their linguistic competencies as deficiencies and question their intellectual abilities and self-confidence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Silence</th>
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| **How do Black women and Latinas experience their voice and silence?** | **Private (Home):**  
- Raw tongue full of feelings, emotions, meaning, honesty  
- Advocacy  
- Outspokenness  
- Confidence | **Private (Home):**  
- A form of punishment, obedience and or respect for elders, and parents |
|                                                        | **Public Sphere (i.e., School):**  
- Process of learning  
- Survival | **Public Sphere (i.e., School):**  
- Discomfort with learning  
- Lack of understanding |
| **How do Black women and Latinas understand their voice and silence?** | **Private (Home):**  
- Communication with family, friends social community  
- Connected to family, identity, culture | **Private (Home):**  
- A form of punishment, obedience and or respect for elders, parents.  
- Learning and knowledge acquisition.  
- Engaging material |
|                                                        | **Public Sphere (i.e., School):**  
- Process of learning  
- Survival | |
| **What meanings do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence?** | **Public Sphere (i.e., School):**  
- Positive aspect of learning promoted by supportive teachers and nurturing academic environments  
- Negative aspects of learning when told to alter speech | **Public Sphere: (i.e., School):**  
- Lack of understanding associated with learning.  
- Punishment, obedience and or respect for elders, parents |

Table 1  
Pre-Collegiate Experience
The Bitter Sweetness of Collegiate Classrooms

Reflecting on the institutional value of Noel College, participants found the environment to be academically rigorous, yet supportive of women’s learning, leadership development and critical thinking skills. Overall, participants agreed that attending a women’s college had a positive and rewarding impact on their learning as women. “I feel the overall benefit of being here, as a woman” (Violeta). “Noel College has equipped me with the skills to build on the inner strength I always knew I had. It’s just tapping into it, and it sort of grows from there” (Jada). “There has not been an environment that has nurtured me like [this], it is a good thing because you will have the confidence as a woman” (Kimora). “Being here it’s like you are learning, and you are just having fun. You are able to relate to other women from everywhere around the world. I love to learn, and I just like being focused. Being at Noel College gives me this” (Vikki). Because Noel College provided a uniquely supportive climate for women to explore their intellectual and leadership abilities, participants were satisfied with the institutional environment. However, the collegiate classrooms of Noel College created what Issy called “un choque cultural,” a cultural collision/culture shock that severely limited the ability of Black women and Latina participants to engage in the collegiate classroom. Two phenomena contributing to the cultural collision of Black women and Latinas within the classrooms of Noel College was an environment of White privilege and entitlement coupled with the experience of situational identity threat and stereotype threat.
Lack of Racial Diversity and
Consciousness of Student Peers and Faculty

In describing their interactions with White peers, participants expressed overall frustration and general exhaustion with their lack of exposure to racial diversity and socioeconomic awareness. “If frustrates me when I have to talk to some White girl from Wisconsin or something and she is like ‘really’ and then I realized after I said it, I sounded really angry…” (Dee).

I think the biggest part is just the arrogance, and that is why I really don’t have a lot of White friends here because they don’t even understand the amount of privilege that they have and where they come from, and so they look at you mostly because they have never had to interact with a person of color before, and they are just in awe! (Eve)

Like many students of color attending predominantly White institutions, the lack of racial diversity at Noel College has meant that participants have had the responsibility of educating and raising awareness around racial diversity within the collegiate environment. For the women in this study, the conversations that emerged around race within classrooms created a great deal of discomfort because they became visible/spotlighted, and they were forced to represent the perspectives of their ethnoracial group.

I can honestly say it feels awkward. The more I am noticing it; it does feel awkward that you are representing the whole. But when you are conscious of it, it makes you say, “Oh my God!” Maybe in the back of my mind I have been saying, “Well, if I am representing the whole than maybe I shouldn’t open my mouth and say something stupid because they [White students] think I speak for all.” (Kimora)

Reading something in a book is completely different than living it. It’s hard for me sometimes because they [White students] don’t really need to know my business. But at the same time somebody needs to knock them upside the head or something, to give them a little bit of insight and understanding. It’s just frustrating! (Eve)
I sit in front of the class. I feel like I am involved, and I have a connection with the professors…but it’s something about when I speak, like I don’t want to involve my culture in the class because my comments are not about my culture…So I feel that anything I say it’s because I am looking at it from a Latin American perspective and not as an individual. (Vikki)

As a minority in this institution, I feel like in the U.S. it is always put upon us to be a representative model of our group and if you are not and you don’t come prepared to class than you are ignorant. (Violeta)

Participants believed their White peers and some professors generalized and claimed to know all about Black and Latino people based on the answers they provided in classroom discussions. This placed unnecessary pressure on participants. Moreover, the lack of exposure and understanding of racial difference, by Whites, not only worked to ostracize and further place Black women and Latina participants on the outskirts of the collegiate classrooms, but the (conscious and unconscious) racial ignorance of White peers functioned to create a constant feeling of being othered.

The lack of racial education/awareness had the negative impact of spotlighting or making participants too visible within the classroom. As such, an over-emphasis and focus on the physical presence and verbal responses of Black women and Latinas forced them to be too visible/spotlighted or “on display,” as Jada called it. While the women were sometimes made to feel spotlighted/visible, they were simultaneously ignored and made to feel invisible by some their instructors and peers.

I would say something and contribute to the discussion, and 10 minutes later another student would say the same exact thing. I would get overlooked and the professor would say, “Yeah, you know such and such.” I would get so upset because I said that 10 minutes ago! (Eve)

According to the participants, the lack of racial diversity training by faculty members also heightened the alienation experienced by participants.
When some instructors did attempt to bravely engage students in discussions about race, many times there was a lack of authenticity/sincerity or an obvious discomfort on the part of the faculty member. This discomfort and lack of sincerity worked to perpetuate uneasy feelings among peers and between some students and faculty. Jada described it best in her experience with one faculty member.

There was a lot of things going on. One was just that she was inexperienced as a professor and didn’t really know how to manage a classroom well… There were times where I felt like she felt uncertain how to manage the relationship between her and I because I was older, and so in some level she wanted to have a relationship and be cool, but she was also the professor so she needed to draw a fine line, and she really didn’t know how to negotiate all that, and it came out in ways that I felt disrespected, and so I had to check her [she felt disrespected and had to address immediately] and another professor. I feel like, this semester I had to say something, and it sort of ruined our relationship for the rest of the semester. (Jada)

The conscious and unconscious stereotype invoked by some professors’ lack of racial consciousness towards participants speaks to the legacy of White privilege and entitlement embedded in the institutional and collegiate classroom environments of Noel College.

White Privilege and Entitlement

Theories of White privilege as expressed by McIntosh (1998) and Lipsitz (2006) suggest that Whites view their social, cultural, and economic experience as a norm that everyone should experience and employ, rather than as an advantaged position that must be maintained at the expense of others. This was clearly evident for the participants at Noel College. Black women and Latinas felt they were present, but they were not an integral part of the classroom. “They walk in. They are entitled. We walk in, and we got to earn it. We got to learn this way of being in our personal lives. We are like that quiet
woman or that outspoken woman, never the smart woman” (Dal). “Most of the students here have resources, parents who have money … to support them in whatever they do” (Issy).

It’s them having experienced or never had to go without anything… You can just tell in the way they talk, in their composure, in their presentation. They just act a different way, and you rarely see any humility in anything… They just don’t acknowledge that they could ever be wrong… So when I actually say something and asked a question…it was an eye opener because they don’t think that a lot of women of color on campus know as much as they do, when in fact most us know more. (Eve)

The explicit encounters experienced with White peers led participants to believe that White students were the norm by which they were being measured and judged. Black women and Latinas in this study realized earlier on in their collegiate experience that integrating into the competitive academic and social landscape of Noel College was a one-way process of assimilation in which they were forced to adapt to White views, norms, and practices. The challenge for Black women and Latina participants was that their identities were simultaneously being developed, questioned, expanded and/or dramatically altered while in college. Thus, the negative assumptions held of Black women and Latinas by many of their White peers, often triggered feelings of inadequacy and frustrations, causing the participants to constantly justify their place at Noel College. “The inadequacy was felt. It was there” (Dal). “At times, I felt like I was at a disadvantage, although I gained a lot from studying, I still felt my fellow peers looked at me different. It’s very frustrating” (Violeta). “It was intimidating and frustrating at times because every time they talked about Latinos, they [her peers] looked at me” (Yoli).

Moreover, the inability of participants to identify with the collegiate learning environment of Noel College ostracized them further, requiring excessive mental and
emotional energy to remain invested in their academic career. Dalis candidly said, “There is not enough of me here...I am always having to force myself into this foreign space.”

Situational Identity Threat and Stereotype Threat

Upon entering the collegiate classrooms, participants described feeling a host of reactions and emotions; ranging from excitement, frustration, inadequacy, fear of failure, self-doubt, being spotlighted/visible, and/or invisible. They spoke of interactions/experiences with professors and peers that forced them to doubt their intellectual abilities, to question their identities and whether they belonged in the academic environment of Noel College. For instance, “in a lot of classrooms, you just feel like you’re standing by yourself, and that is a sense of powerlessness (Jada). “I often feel unsure of myself when answering questions, so I don’t even like to do it” (Dee). What these women experienced is what social psychologists Cohen and Garcia (2007) called situational identity threat.

Situational identity threat is a theory in which “social identities, such as one’s race or gender, can interact with other factors to affect achievement” (Cohen & Garcia, 2007, p. 157). Within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College the social identities of participants were marginalized due to White privilege/entitlement existing within the institution. White privilege is not only about experiences on an individual level, but it is a web of institutional and cultural preferential treatment (McIntosh, 1998) that impact the experience and interactions of students. The fact that Noel College historically has been home to middle- and upper-class, White women created a constant distortion of racial and gendered identity for participants in collegiate classrooms. For the first time in their lives,
these women were forced to grapple with the dichotomous and ambiguous nature of their shared racial and gendered identities within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College. This dichotomy, two-ness, multiplicity was not of their own choosing. Rather, it resulted from the interactions participants had with faculty and White peers within the predominantly White collegiate classrooms of Noel College.

Feeling isolated, undervalued, unrecognized, like misfits, as if they did not belong in the academic community (because of their ethno-racial group membership) was a constant rather than a minor experience for participants. The uncertainty felt in classrooms seemed to have stemmed from an unspoken institutionalized culture that existed within collegiate classrooms of Noel College; based on White, upper/middle-class norms, views, and practices. In other words, the Black women and Latinas of this study who brought difference to the middle/upper-class White environment of Noel College not only challenged the norm but were faced with doing the work of wrestling with uncertainty and questioning their social identities within the academic environment.

You have now entered another space, another level of fighting. You are going to be in this position of claiming, of defending, of making sure that people acknowledge who you really are, [as an individual] not the stereotype…I think some professors and students looked at me as an exotic presence/contribution in class, excited to know who I am and where I am from. (Dalis)

In a lot of classrooms you just feel like you’re standing by yourself, and that is a sense of powerlessness, and even though you are being empowered, there is a limit to what you are exactly able to do… Sometimes you question yourself because you just don’t know the people in the classroom environment. (Violeta)

“You feel like you don’t fit in the classroom… You just feel like you are not going to see people like you in there” (Yoli). “I expected to be appreciated, heard and listened… In terms of the professors I get two different extremes: I get this overemphasis on me or I feel a little ignored” (Jada). The duality of being oneself and other, insider and outsider,
invisible and visible/spotlighted within collegiate classrooms made participants conscious of how they perceive and judge themselves and how they are perceived and judged by others. The dichotomous function of their racial and gendered identities was further exacerbated by the stereotype threat experienced.

Stereotype threat refers to the risk of conforming to a negative stereotype about one’s group membership (racial, gender, etc.) (Steele, 1995). It can undermine academic performance by raising stress and increasing mental load (Cohen & Garcia, 2007). In the case of Black women and Latinas in this study, the collegiate classrooms of Noel College were often perceived as hostile, unwelcoming foreign spaces. “It’s [being in the collegiate classroom] a vicious cycle, and it is a vicious cycle for me because I have do this [get my education], and I cannot make mistakes (Eve).

You feel awkward. You feel like you are out of it… I felt people were looking at me… So my experience still has been **una bataya, una pelea que siempre tengo que tener por que no importa lo mas que yo trate, intente para aprenderlo no puedo…todavia** [a battle, it’s a constant fight because it doesn’t matter how much I try to learn it, I can’t]. I haven’t been able to maneuver myself around. I can’t swim around, It’s like I am always treading water... It’s the stereotype that we have. It’s almost like we don’t know how to speak. We look a certain way, and we don’t know how to speak… When you are in this space, you start being critical of yourself…I felt scared to be confronted with not being intelligent or being looked down upon or fulfilling the stereotype of all my people. (Dalís)

It’s been tough. It’s been a struggle. It’s been a push that has forced me to think. I mean this isn’t the real world, but it’s a little part of the real world. I mean I am a minority in an academic situation, and there are not a lot of us… It’s a realization that life is not going to get easier…I can’t tell you how many times I come out of a class discouraged, and you feel that sense of being alone. (Issy)

So it’s very hard to be in a classroom and become educated and get your point across, to learn about other people and appreciate other people, when you feel like you are being targeted or looked at differently. (Yoli)

I have come to realize that it doesn’t matter if I know all the words in the dictionary. These people will never come to understand… not just what I go through, it’s just being here. What it is like to be a minority in this place. (Violeta)
It was so uncomfortable being the only Black person in the class having one person talking to the teacher the entire time and having other people looking at me and then not looking at me… It is the tension in the room. (Kimora)

Using expressions like, “It’s a vicious cycle, una bataya [a battle]. It’s tough. It’s been a struggle, always treading water, not fitting in, being critical of oneself, scared of fulfilling stereotypes, being alone, tension in the room” speaks to the constant internal strife and ambivalence participants experienced. These women not only questioned their academic abilities; whether they belong at Noel College, but they even second guessed their input and verbal interactions with faculty and peers. All of these women were talented individuals who despite evidence of their academic competence, felt inadequate, like imposters in the classroom, as if their being there and their success was due to a fluke, instead of to their talent as academically competent women.

The awareness of their marginal status within collegiate classrooms forced participants not only to question whether they belonged in the academic environment of Noel College, but it also forced them to doubt their intellectual self-confidence and academic abilities as knowers and learners. This self-doubt was further intensified by the lack of racial diversity and immense White privilege and entitlement existing among their peers at Noel College.

Summary

The collegiate classrooms of Noel College created a learning environment where women were free to explore a wide range of intellectual and leadership skills. Critical thinking skills were also highly valued and women openly shared their perspectives
without any inhibitions. However, as a microcosm of the larger society, the predominantly White environment of Noel College also caused a cultural collision for participants.

The challenge participants encountered was a racial and class alienation existing in the collegiate classrooms that forced them to question their intellectual self-confidence and sense of self. While collegiate classrooms of Noel College functioned to educate and raise the critical consciousness of Black women and Latina participants, it also functioned to create and perpetuate a constant distortion of their racial and gendered identity. This dichotomy, two-ness, multiplicity of being oneself and other, insider and outsider, visible and invisible resulted from White privilege/entitlement existing within the classroom and institutional walls of Noel College.

Being visible/spotlighted or invisible (hence ignored) was not something that participants chose; it was a situation they were suddenly placed in during their education at Noel College. The lack of racial awareness and White privilege not only worked to maintain the status quo of entitlement for White students, but it worked to continue to marginalize participants. They questioned everything about themselves, including their presence at Noel College. The messages received by Black women and Latina participants within the collegiate classroom space was one that suggested you represent your race and be visible in the classroom or be rendered invisible. In other words, be visible and over recognized by your White peers and faculty or be ignored, unrecognized, or misrecognized within the collegiate classroom. Considering these factors, race was a constant factor that impacted the academic experiences of participants within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College. The academic performance of participants cannot
be discussed without examining race and racial dynamics within the classroom. Nowhere was this most evident than in their use of voice and silence and the cultivation of their intellectual identity.

**Voice**

In this study, participants discussed how socio-contextual features of collegiate classrooms (i.e., class size, racial diversity, professor’s pedagogy) and their interactions with peers/professors had a direct influence on how and when they exercised their voice in the classrooms of Noel College. In discussing their experiences, three distinguishing features of voice emerged for Black women and Latina participants, instrumental voice, raw tongue and symbolic voice.

The collegiate classrooms of Noel College functioned as a double edge sword for Black women and Latina participants. Classrooms provided participants with the necessary skills for intellectual cultivation (through rigorous educational curriculums), development of critical thinking skills, and dialogue amongst peers and faculty. However, the collegiate classrooms of Noel College also functioned to marginalize participants, forcing them to question and doubt their own academic abilities. These struggles were most notable in the instrumental voice and Raw Tongue of participants.

**Instrumental Voice**

Instrumental voice represents the speech and perspective of the speaker within collegiate classrooms. It is the ability of an individual to use voice, to talk, verbally participate, and articulate academic content in classroom spaces. Within collegiate
classrooms, instrumental voice for participants was manifested as an expression of their academic student behavior.

**Academic Student Behavior**

The institutionalized academic culture of some colleges and university classrooms make it so verbal participation is a required norm for students. As a method of evaluating learning, verbal participation has been cited as central to the learning process (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Students, who actively participate in their learning process, learn more than those who do not (Weaver & Qi, 2005). As a part of their knowledge acquisition and learning process, participants (like all students) used their instrumental voice as a tool to ask questions, to clarify academic content, and to share their comments and/or perspectives. Despite the fact that participants agreed that verbal participation was imperative to their learning, they also agreed their learning and instrumental voice was facilitated by relationships forged with professors and their level of academic preparation.

Being comfortable with professors was an essential component of the instrumental voice of participants. Whether their relationship with professors resulted from an academic discussion or a social program/activity, participants were more likely to speak/use their instrumental voice in classrooms where a relationship with instructors had been established. Knowing their professors from previous classes or activities created a connection and a level of comfort and respect that enabled them to become more engaged and to speak with more confidence and ease. “I feel comfortable enough with Professor X to just open my mouth and ask any question” (Dee). “When I feel like a class
is actually giving back to me and I can actually build off of it, I am learning more, and I can contribute to the class” (Violeta).

I am always constantly one on one with the professors…I sit in the front and participate a lot. I feel like I am involved, and I have a connection with the professors… participation is something that I could write on my resume, but not really [laughing]. It’s very important to me because that is how I learn. That is how I acquire knowledge like through the college experience not even just in the classroom. (Vikki)

I think it’s very helpful going to my professor and telling them that I am shy, and I get nervous and really just being honest with them. Like, “I need your help to help me participate more,” but I talked a lot in English class because I liked it and the professor! (Eve)

So I tried to participate more. I would open my mouth once or twice, and if the professor would point at me, I would say what I had to say and move on… but I definitely participate more when I am comfortable in that [academic] area, and I am comfortable talking in the class and I just like the topic. (Kimora)

I feel like if you don’t have a relationship or connection with the professor you are at a disadvantage. If you are in the classroom where the person does not really know you, like I feel I need to know that professor at least to a certain level to perform in the classroom so they understand that even if I don’t understand the question, they can help me understand it. So I think that it is important for you to have a connection with the professor. (Yoli)

The relationship Black women and Latina participants forged with professors also helped to further develop their intellectual self-confidence.

The intellectual self-confidence of participants improved with their academic preparation. The more academically prepared they were, the more confident Black women and Latina participants felt within classrooms. “Part of participating and speaking is getting the information that I need and learning is huge for me! Like I really need to get it. I need to understand it! I don’t want to go and put my head down and sleep in a classroom” (Jada). Being academically prepared and having an awareness of the academic content allowed Black women and Latina participants to employ their literal
voice with more ease as well. Moreover, instructors who cared for the well-being and academic success of participants also created collegiate environments where Black women and Latinas blossomed.

Well, the classes that I felt I participated the most were for two reasons. I felt like the professor was very encouraging in the classroom and very open to actually hearing my opinions, and I feel like he really is interested in what I have to say. Sometimes, he has come back to me to say, “Oh Violeta, I was thinking about what you said the other day and I started to read something.” It was just so impressive to me because it was like, ok this professor just did not forget me once I left the classroom, I am really someone who makes him think! (Violeta)

With Professor XX, first she was of color, which was a big plus for me. She would tell us about her life experience. Her grandmother was Puerto Rican, and she knew a little Spanish and in that way I was able to connect…but I remember after a couple of weeks into the class, I engaged and spoke more in class because we started to connect. (Issy)

One of my teachers is very engaging. It’s like you get energized just watching her move around in the classroom, telling her little antidotes…But I feel comfortable enough to ask questions and just open my mouth. Even if I say something stupid or what I think is stupid, I don’t care. (Kimora)

These relationships fostered a growing determination in Black women and Latina participants to learn more and be the best academically. However, the greatest challenge for participants within the predominantly White, competitive classrooms of Noel College was that their voice also became a marker of their racial and class difference.

Raw Tongue

When participants entered the collegiate classrooms of Noel College, they had an established pattern of talk. In fact, like any student, Black women and Latina participants entered Noel College with a raw tongue, a set of dispositions and linguistic patterns acquired during their socialization/interaction with their family, friends, and social communities. As such, upon entering the predominantly White, collegiate classrooms of
Noel College, Black women and Latinas participants already had a set of acquired linguistic/communications skills.

As women of diverse ethno-racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, participants learned to talk in a raw tongue. The raw tongue participants utilized in collegiate classrooms differed from the raw tongue expressed in high school. Raw tongue in collegiate classrooms was understood as a frustrating response to student peers and faculty. When Black women and Latina in study used their raw tongue within the collegiate classrooms, they were often responding to the ignorance and the inability of their White peers to understand issues of social justice, racial and economic equity. As the word raw suggests, “being in a natural condition, not processed or refined” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1976, p.1029), participants did not filter their words, or comments. There was no code switching or modification of speech. In other words, their raw tongue was real, untrained, honest, filled with emotion and passion. They spoke in the vernacular of their family and or community, for example.

When was the last time you went to the hood? You don’t know, you have no idea what I am talking about because you haven’t experienced anything, but rather than say, oh I understand where you are coming from (not knowing my background), she was like, “Oh, that can’t be right,” and I said, “You are White as White can be. You are not going to understand it!” and that class sometimes really ticks me off because it’s a bunch of privileged, White, rich kids that don’t understand anything that is going on, and they don’t try to. They don’t try to at all. They are like, “Oh yeah, I read it in a book.” Reading something in a book is completely different than living it, and it’s hard for me sometimes because I try not to act off of what I have been though personally…but somebody needs to knock them outside the head or something to give them a little bit of insight and understanding. It’s just frustrating, very frustrating!” (Eve)

Like wow! I mean seriously I am over here struggling, you know, reading and trying to make sure that I know all this stuff, and you have your whole life ahead of you! It’s a totally different experience where you and your parents come from, and they are there to support you, and my parents worked so much and have so
little. Although I did go to a private school, it was very difficult for you [White students] to relate! (Issy)

I definitely felt that she [the professor] was going to stay as far away from me as she could, and I wondered if that would have been the case, if I had been a White woman who had said to her, when you talk to me, we need to know each other and respect each other. You can’t just turn your back to me and walk away when I am asking a question! This made me want to curse her out, but instead I came off as really angry and disrespectful. (Jada)

You can come from such a different background and the shit they study. Like, the poverty in urban cities, you know all these things they study, we/I live! That is us! We are part of that urban poverty! And they don’t know what it’s like to live without food and not have! Like I come from a very poor background you know! My mom was on welfare, and she didn’t work. I was also on welfare. I still receive assistance because I have a family, and it’s hard!... It’s just crazy. I see it, and it’s funny… I feel this social status, privilege. You know the racist elitist attitudes come out in the classrooms. (Yoli)

Who am I? You don’t know who I am! I am sick and tired… The girls in the classroom were like, “Wow!” We were talking about being poor and the poor community. And the term ghetto was being thrown around like nothing. By the second week of class, I said I was sick and tired of all you talking about the ghetto! Let me tell you about the ghetto! Let me tell you what fucking welfare is, and I just went off on them! In another situation I went off again on the teacher and the students. We were talking about poverty and privilege, and I said, “How dare you tell me that I was formerly poor? You don’t know me! You don’t know what it took for me to be here! You don’t know how sad I am that my mom is in a small apartment, and I am here taking classes, not working and unable to assist her the way I would want to!” And my professor looked at me, and he said, “Tell us Dalis,” and I said, “No! I am not going to be your guinea pig right now!” (Dalis)

Interactions with White peers and some professors forced participants to employ their raw tongue out of anger and frustration of not being understood, heard, and/or taken seriously. As result, their raw tongue created discomfort and tension amongst their White peers. Their blunt, assertive responses towards their White peers’ lack of sensitivity and understanding created situations where participants spoke with no inhibitions or filters. When Black women and Latina participants used their raw tongue in collegiate classrooms, their honest and heartfelt responses were often misunderstood by their White
peers. Their White peers often perceived such interactions/responses as “hostile,” “too firm,” and/or “unfriendly.” Instead of listening to the comments and questions posed by Black women and Latina participants, White women were either intrigued and wanted to learn more about their lived experiences or expressed discomfort through explicit verbal and non-verbal cues, for example. “White students loved to hear what I had to say. Professors too, they saw me as an exotic contribution, an exotic addition. I brought validity to the Latina experience! Whatever that means. (Dalis). “I expected something different, but in class I do feel this overemphasis on what I say, especially when we are talking about race. The White students become very interested in my opinions” (Jada).

I talked a lot in my English class because I liked it, and a lot of times girls would be all bright eyed when they were talking about something, or when someone else was talking they would always look at them, and when I would say something, they would look at me, and I would see this, their shoulders dropped. They would put their hands in their face or something. Their eyes and body language showed no interest, as if what I was saying was ludicrous. (Eve)

When Black women and Latina participants used their raw tongue as an expression of their voice, once again they became visible/on display/spotlighted within the classroom, impacting their level of verbal engagement in classrooms. Participants believed White peers judged them according to unconscious/conscious stereotypes and attitudes. This was the kind of prejudice that was not overt; instead it was subconscious and made through associations that White students learned earlier on in their pre-collegiate socialization process. As a result, how White peers looked at and understood participants was connected to how they heard them within collegiate classrooms, for example. The raw tongue of Black women and Latinas in this study was perceived as “too ghetto” by their White peers. “Too ghetto” usually refers to the experiences of people of a particular race or ethno-racial group that act or are perceived to behave improperly through
fulfilling negative stereotypes. Being perceived as “too ghetto,” by their White peers had serious implications for participants. One student candidly expressed how she felt after employing her raw tongue during a discussion. “People were looking at me and that is how I felt, like what came out of my mouth, it wasn’t really what I wanted to say or how I wanted it to come out…I didn’t sound intelligent especially in an academic space, I sounded angry” (Dalis). Because the raw tongue of participants was juxtaposed to what was considered the “appropriate academic discourse,” Black women and Latinas participants were led to believe that their linguistic skills were deficient. Although some of the women in this study were monolingual and brought different linguistic backgrounds and forms of expressions within classrooms, their different linguistic styles were not valued. Instead, through a number of student encounters/interactions Black women and Latina participants received explicit and implicit cues that their raw tongue was not only a risk but a responsibility that needed to be self-monitored to speak and be heard within collegiate classrooms of Noel College.

Risk and Responsibility: Self-Monitoring Behavior

Prior to attending Noel College, participants did not perceive their raw tongue or linguistic skills as deficient. Instead, they entered the collegiate environment with their diverse linguistic backgrounds, eager to be part of a learning community of intelligent women. However, for the first time in their academic experience, these women believed they were forced to learn a different language from the raw tongue they learned from their parents and social communities. They recognized that a particular type of voice was required to speak and be heard within collegiate classrooms of Noel College.
The academic discourse that participants were forced to employ was not by their own choosing, but imposed by the institution, peers and professors. “They [White female] talk a language that is very elite. Sometimes, they will say things that shit, I have never heard in my life! It’s different, and it’s something I am not used to, but I have had to learn how to talk like that!” (Yoli). Participants realized earlier on in their educational trajectory that their voice (whether it instrumental voice or raw tongue) functioned as a risk and a responsibility within collegiate classrooms. With every linguistic utterance that was voiced within collegiate classrooms, participants were aware that they were at risk of fulfilling negative stereotypes held of their particular ethno-racial group.

I think at first it [speaking] was risky. It felt like I was vulnerable because I didn’t know what their [White peers] response would be to my response…I just felt alone in my contributions…I felt scared to be confronted with not being intelligent or being looked down upon or fulfilling the stereotype of all my people, so it was a lot of responsibility…or at times I was so pissed off at their ignorant comments that I could not even blink ‘cause that thing was going to come out! That rawness and that again I will fulfill a stereotype. (Dalis)

Talking in class has gotten a little bit easier, but at the same time I think a lot more before I respond because I don’t want to make them [White students] feel like I am mad at them! You know the aggressive Black girl! But I don’t want to sound stupid either! (Dee)

It’s even more pressure when you are at a high caliber institution, and, you know, there is that pressure that you are here and you’re Latina. I think about it every day. As a Latina there is this fear that if I say something stupid or if I go off on a tangent that is going to be blamed on the fact that I am Latina. Oh mira esa Latina tan Estupida (oh look at the Latina, so stupid). She has no idea what she is talking about…I don’t want them to think I am stupid…so if I don’t say something really smart, I prefer not to say anything. (Issy)

I often times feel unsure of myself when answering questions. I don’t even like to do it, but then I find out it’s correct, but I guess that is one of the detriments to speaking in class, sounding stupid. I guess I really didn’t like it when all eyes were on me as a Black woman (Dee)
I sit in class and think about how to ask and/or phrase the questions to not sound stupid. I think about what I say a lot and sometimes I am reluctant to speak and argue and comment on certain things that I know. (Yoli)

Speaking within the collegiate classroom was considered a risk because Black women and Latina participants did not want to be perceived by their White peers and professors as unintelligent, incompetent women fulfilling negative stereotypes of their entire ethno-racial group. Because the way White students looked at and understood participants was so predicated on how they heard them within collegiate classrooms, Black women and Latinas in this study felt pressure and responsibility to also speak and demonstrate that individuals in their ethno-racial group could successfully enter and complete college. The responsibility to speak and attempt to dispel/undue the negative stereotypes that their peers and/or professors may have, also forced participants to modify their behavior within classrooms.

To speak and be heard within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College, participants had the burden of self-monitoring their behavior within collegiate classrooms. Because their communication patterns often determined how they were perceived in collegiate classrooms, Black women and Latinas participants became more conscious of what they said and how they expressed themselves. This self-monitoring took the form of modifying their voice and/or behavior in classrooms to refute the negative stereotypes of being “too ghetto,” and prove they are serious students, for example. “I am not raw anymore, I was at the beginning, but I don’t talk like that anymore.” (Dalís)

There has been so many times, I can’t even count, that we have been told to hush, that we are too loud…so I am very cautious of what I say and how I say things in the classrooms now. (Yoli)
I was just talking and I realized I started getting better at talking and speaking, and a lot of people I was working with in various groups in different classes started looking at me. This happened often so I became aware of my behavior in class when I speak. (Eve)

Self-monitoring their behavior and changing their linguistic expressions had more to do with their fear of fulfilling negative stereotypes than assimilating and attempting to fit into the predominantly White environment of Noel College. Voice for participants was not simply about expressing thoughts, ideas, and feelings in collegiate classrooms. Although it was not from their own choosing, voice of participants also became a marker of their racial identity and economic status. The choice to employ their instrumental voice, Raw tongue, and/or modify their linguistic expressions and behaviors was based on a level of critical/political consciousness each woman possessed. Possessing a critical consciousness as Black women and Latinas allowed them to develop and exercise a symbolic voice.

Symbolic Voice

Symbolic voice is the right of an individual to speak and be heard. It is a multilingual voice that emerged from self-definition, self-awareness, and a recognition of multiple identities. Symbolic voice is grounded in intellectual self-confidence, agency, and an awareness of an existing collective identity as women of color. This unique finding is political in nature because individuals speak as empowered subjects, connecting ideas learned in collegiate classrooms to those experienced in life.

The gradual evolution from a voice to a symbolic voice occurred at different stages for participants. Because symbolic voice seemed to be linked to their identity, developing this form of voice was not a process that occurred simultaneously for
participants. Some women came into their symbolic voice during their sophomore and junior year like Violeta, Eve, Issy and Dee. Others, as non-traditional students (Dalis, Jada, and Yoli), seemed to have developed and expressed their symbolic voice faster than their traditional college peers because of their lived experience as mothers, professionals, community organizers, and financial providers. Vikki, who was a freshmen, during this study, had yet to fully develop a symbolic voice because she was still acclimating herself to the environment. Participants did not enter the collegiate classrooms with a symbolic voice. Their symbolic voice developed gradually through their interactions with women of color and professors of color who fostered a sense of agency, intellectual self-confidence, and critical reflection. When participants engaged their symbolic voice, they learned to strategically combine their raw tongue with the academic/linguistic skills acquired in collegiate spaces, to express their new “political” consciousness. The symbolic voice of Black women and Latinas in this study developed from an awareness and tolerance of the contradictions and ambiguity of their identity as women of color within collegiate classrooms. Developing their symbolic voice was a challenging process because it required that participants undergo a process of consciousness-raising to refute imposed stereotypical images of womanhood.

**Consciousness-Raising: The Process of Critical Reflection and Self-Reflexivity**

Critical reflection requires that individuals become critically aware and question the validity of taken for granted meanings on presuppositions about encounters with the world, others, and oneself (Friere, 1970; hooks, 1989). Inherent in critical reflection is a process of self-reflexivity, which involves assessing and challenging established habitual
patterns and meanings of how the self has been constructed. Self-reflexivity refers to the
capacity of an individual to understand and recognize forces of socializing that shape his
or her place in social structures (Awkward, 2008) Within Noel College, participants
learned to engage in critical reflection and self-reflexivity through relationships and
interactions with professors of color and students of color.

Courses taught by professors of color were integral to consciousness-raising for
Black women and Latina participants. The positive teacher-student relationship with
professors of color fostered opportunities for critical reflection and self-reflexivity where
participants began to question previously held beliefs about their academic abilities and
their place in society.

She is a professor of color, which is a big plus. She would tell us about her
grandmother who was Puerto Rican, and she knew a little Spanish and I was able
to connect with her through that… During one class I broke down [crying] and I
remember just right after class we were talking about internalized racism, and I
broke down in the bathroom. This made me approach her to speak to her about
my reaction to the class, and this is how we started to connect, and I became
aware that I was experiencing internalized racism. All that I was feeling had to do
with the fact that I thought these White women were smarter and better than me.
(Issy)

I was very much into this class because it was taught by a professor of color. He
was Latino, and I felt comfortable. I felt like there were people like me in the
classroom. He was a tough professor, and even though I was afraid of Montes, I
was in his office weekly harassing him and asking him questions even if they
were stupid questions. I was making sure I did this because he told me how
important it is to connect with your professors. “You need to get the answers that
you need from this education because I don’t know what you know. You can’t let
me pour information into you and expect you to know everything without asking
any questions.” So that struck a chord in me, so I began to own my education and
ask important questions and see how the information I was learning applied to my
life. It was empowering! (Yoli)

I was at Yale last summer doing research with Professor Brown and she was a
very tough and strict professor. You could not do anything wrong in her eyes, and
she was my friend’s mentor, and she told the both of us, “You have to have
everything on point! You have to present yourself well, whether it is the way you
dress or the way you speak. You can’t come out of your room or go to class in your pajamas. You cannot have your hair undone! You have to at least stick it back in a neat pony tail and add your clip on hair pieces or something, but you cannot go out looking like any old thing.” She also said, “The reason why I am so strict is because when I was in graduate school I had an experiment going on and this White boy came and undid my electroids.” Because she was running like a chemical gradient to test cells and he unplugged everything and he said, “No nigger is going to get a head of me,” and after that she said, “You know what? I got to do everything that I need to do in this world to get by and get past them” At the time, I actually did not understand why she told us that story, but I learned that when you are dealing in the academic setting, it’s very important to have a voice and it’s very important to make sure that voice is heard. I think about her advice now and understand why she gave us this important information. It was insight on how to survive in college. (Eve)

Throughout my time at Noel College, I worked with Professor John. When I arrived the first semester, I knew I needed to know this man. So I got connected with a community-based learning program and I have been the community liaison and administrative fellow ever sense. So this is my program. I worked very closely with Dr. John, and my independent research was funded every summer to work with CT community. So I had this entire line of summer research data I had collected, and he encouraged me to write a thesis and put a committee together. He was so valuable to my academic development at Noel College. He helped me believe in myself and become the researcher I am today. (Dalís)

Participants were more comfortable sharing their social and academic challenges of academic life with professors of color. Professors of color provided academic support, advice, mentorship, and affirmation that allowed participants to voice their thoughts and experiences. “Professors of color looked out for us, more so than White professors. They got your back!” (Yoli). Not only did they recognize and affirm the contributions and experiences of Black women and Latina participants in collegiate classrooms, they assured them they belonged and had a place in academia. By encouraging participants to give voice to thoughts and/or uncomfortable ideas and feelings, professors of color created conditions for critical reflection and self-reflexivity, for consciousness-raising. Creating what hooks (1994) calls “self-empowering conditions,” professors of color played a pivotal role in the development of a critical consciousness/political awareness.
for Black women and Latinas within collegiate classrooms. During their academic experience at Noel College, all the Black women and Latinas who participated in this study took courses that dealt with race, class exploitation, sexism, racial diversity, psychology of racism, social justice, and multiculturalism. Because conversations about race and class inequality had the potential to create discomfort and further alienate and/or make Black women and Latina participants more visible in classrooms, having professors of color equipped with the skills to effectively manage conversations around difference promoted opportunities for learning, critical reflection, and self-reflexivity for participants.

The lack of racial diversity within collegiate classrooms, coupled with the dialogues about race, racism, and other oppressions forced participants to be more self-reflexive and to interrogate their social/racial identities. They began to think critically about their sense of self and their identity in relations to their own lived experience and sociopolitical circumstances.

So my identity has changed. It has changed because I have become aware and angry! I am angry at the reasons why I am, the reasons why I feel the way that I do now, and the reasons why things happened to me. Why I didn’t have the education or why education didn’t come to me the way it came to other people…Once I started learning about concepts and theories and the deconstruction of racism and oppression and understanding it, I began to look back at my communities and saw what they were talking about was true. So, I got lots of definitions in class, but there was not that much action or interest [from the White students] in doing something to change the situation of poor, working-class people. So I got angry for all the students that were learning the concepts and were placed in communities [of poor, working-class people of color] like the ones that I came from. To see what was actually happening, and then they come back [to campus], and then they talk about their experience, and they reflected, and then they graduate, and then they do nothing. Like, I don’t need to go back to know that this [poverty, racism, oppression] exist. I know that this exists! What are we going to fucking do about it? So that was one level. I also felt that I am thinking on another level that the communities don’t get it! When you are from a community like mine, you understand all this stuff. You understand institutional
racism to a certain extent...because you see it and experience it everywhere everyday. You just don’t know that it’s called “institutional racism.” I wanted it [this education] so badly, and I wanted to continue doing it, and I am committed to it, but it’s changing me, and it’s changing the way my community sees me, and they are happy about it, but you know how our community is. They say, *a ella le encanta los libros, ella siempre esta estudiando, no te procudes, ella es diferente,* [She loves books. She is always studying. Don’t worry. She is different]. They [some community members] might call me for assistance with issues sometimes, but I am dealing with that feeling right now, with that change in identity. Because I wanted it, I wanted this education and what happens is true. Knowledge is power. Power is knowledge. But there still is this feeling of having to negotiate my education, my learning while remaining loyal and connected to my community. (Dalis)

It [education] is significant, but in the context of me being Latina it causes stress. It’s difficult…I mean I have gotten a lot of positive things from Noel College, which is openness, acceptance from some people. I have been allowed to think in ways that otherwise I wouldn’t be able to think. I am encouraged to think outside the box. But it’s also difficult because, it’s been tough. It’s been a struggle. It’s been a push. It has forced me to think about being a Latina. I mean this isn’t the real world, but it’s a little part of the real world. I mean I am a minority, and you know although for instance, in California there are a lot of us, in an academic situation there are not a lot of us. In a job that I might go into, there may not be a lot of us and maybe a hand full here and there. So in some ways it’s a realization that life is not going to get easier. Here you are in a safe place and you’re somewhat protected, but I don’t know, it is different…I am going to find my way. I know I am struggling a little bit, but when I think about college and what it means to me, a lot of it isn’t really what I learn, like academics, books, and facts… For me, the experience has been an internal process. It’s about not being successful in the way that the world would define success. I don’t get straight A’s. I don’t have internships lined up for myself. I don’t think that I will have easy access to graduate school. I know it’s not going to be easy for me. So, I have really had to push hard and you know at the end sometimes you feel as though you are not good enough! Or at least you feel that way in an institution like this, so prestigious and it’s a high caliber place, and it’s a place where these great minds come together. So, yes, you feel like the outsider sometimes, and that is my experience, but for me, personally, one of the things that caused stress for me is the realization of what the real world will be like. That is a little discouraging for a person like myself where you feel like if I didn’t make it in this little bubble, how am I going to make it in the world. But you just know this academic experience is preparing me for the struggles of the real world. I am going to have to push and work really hard because there is no other way because it’s not going to be easy for me as a Latina, having racial and gender barriers to overcome. (Issy)
Looking at my experience at Noel College in a lot of ways I feel as though it coincides with my experiences in life thus far. I don’t think I have always received the messages about myself that I am worthy, or that I am incredibly intelligent, or that I can break through barriers, but I am in [a] place now where I understand that those are false. I understand that you know that there are other things that impact what I receive from the outside world and so for me, I am not turned away like I may have been at times in my life from education. I welcome the challenge and the knowledge that I received, because it has impacted my view on life and the world. (Jada)

With this educational experience, I have learned to become more critical of what it is like to live within a racist and sexist society and everything that comes along that…Thinking about these things raises my awareness about everything, the system makes you believe that all these things [inequality, class difference, racism] are normal, when really there not. It’s not normal for someone to have million and billions of dollars buying airplanes and someone not even have bread to eat or not even have food for weeks. Knowing this, I think about my experience, my family’s experience and what I need to do in this society to work towards creating a more equitable place to live. (Violeta)

Becoming politically aware through consciousness raising was not an easy process. For many of these women, becoming aware of what it meant to be a Black woman and/or Latina in a patriarchal, capitalist, racist, and sexist society was a painfully challenging process loaded with much confusion. During this process of questioning, reflection, and self-discovery, their identities began to shift. Although participants did not dismiss their individual ethno-racial identities as Jamaican, Puerto Rican, African American, Mexican American women, they became more empowered and began to also embrace a collective political identity as women of color.

We were the same in this place. My girlfriends were Black Latinas. It never became this thing like, “Oh, I am Puerto Rican, and you are Black.” It was like we were women of color and we learned about each other (Dalis).

“Often times, I was the only one—the only Jamaican woman in the class. When I had other women of color, it was easier to engage in discussion. We learned from each others experience” (Kimora).
Hearing similar experiences of other women of color led participants to realize that their feelings of being an outsider-within, of being too visible/invisible, too ghetto/too assertive, or not being smart enough were shared experiences among other women of color. Their shared experience not only created the space to speak from a place of knowing and empowerment but the intragroup discussions between U.S. born and international women of color allowed for a questioning and self-interrogation that led participants to realize and eventually challenge the social constructions/stereotypes used to represent and define them.

(Re)Articulation of Self: New/Multiple Consciousness

Conversations with women of color sparked a re-articulation of self for participants. These conversations triggered a process of self-definition, self-valuation and self-transformation that was based on a consciousness of hybridity, multiplicity, contradictions, resistance and empowerment (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994). Such conversations allowed Black women and Latina participants to realize that women of color occupy a range of class positions in a variety of societies. Furthermore, a recognition and understanding of their shared positionality in the larger society allowed for the creation of “new consciousness/nueva conciencia” (Anzaldúa, 1987; p.77) to develop among Black women and Latinas in this study. Once participants developed these aspects of the self, employing a symbolic voice was inevitable.

Symbolic voice is what hooks (1989) called “transgressive speech,” (p.8) a speech that questions, challenges situations of oppression and power, and talks back to authority when necessary, regardless of the consequences. When the participants speak in their
symbolic voice, a fear of being different and/or being the only Black woman or Latina in classrooms is insignificant. Their symbolic voice is courageous, political, and empowering. It becomes a form of linguistic resistance where a combination of their raw tongue and the traditional academic voice is employed to challenge the institutionalized academic discourse. By combining their raw tongue and academic discourse, Black women and Latinas become multilingual. They embrace the multiplicity of their identity by using the fluidity of their languages and strategically code switching to express their perspective. As hooks (1987) suggest, “Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subject can we speak, as objects we remain voiceless beings defined and interpreted by others” (p.12). Through their symbolic voice, participants expressed to their peers and professors, “I am here and will be heard.” This assertion is an expression of the self-transformation that has occurred under their new multiple consciousness.

When Black women and Latina participants employ their symbolic voice, they recognize and understand their shared racial and gendered positionality within the larger society. Understanding this shared positionality of racial marginalization in public settings, like collegiate classrooms, allows participants to regain a sense of themselves; they become more grounded in who they are. Learning to navigate the in-between spaces of their outsider-within status and embrace the “academic self and women of color other” (Asher, 2001) allows participants to speak as empowered subjects.

As an expression of their “academic self and woman of color other,” or outsider-within status in collegiate classrooms, symbolic voice creates a space that allows participants to embrace the contradictions and ambiguity of their identities. As such,
symbolic voice allows Black women and Latina participants to engage in transformational politics of the self, where they move beyond the assumptions/stereotypes that entrap them to a self that is political, exerts agency, speaks, and is constantly challenging the status quo within collegiate classrooms.

Summary

The participants began their educational trajectory with a raw tongue, a particular speech/speaking pattern that was a direct result of their family and community socialization. Participants developed a raw tongue that was as much a result of their multiple identities as it was their linguistic habitus. In collegiate classrooms, voice was experienced as instrumental voice, raw tongue and symbolic voice. Instrumental voice was understood as the voice of learning and knowledge acquisition. It was the voice that was needed to engage academic material and participate. Raw tongue in collegiate classrooms became a process of racial categorization for participants. Their raw tongue became markers of their communities and their ethno-racial/cultural group membership in collegiate classrooms. As such, when participants employed their raw tongue in discussions, they felt they were perceived as less than and academically substandard by some of their White peers and professors. Because some professors and students were not accustomed to hearing or engaging students that employed different linguistic communication styles in classrooms, participants spoke of experiences where they felt incomplete, which often forced them to question their own abilities. However, a shift from to employing a symbolic voice resulted from consciousness raising through critical
and self-reflexivity acquired through discussions with women of color and professors of color.

Upon reflecting on the complexity and contradictions of their lives, participants began to see the world as one that oppresses, but simultaneously could be changed. This awakening of their subjectivity allowed Black women and Latina participants to speak as engaged political agents. In their self-reflection, participants began to examine their lived experience in light of racism, structural inequality, poverty, and a lack of educational access. Everything participants learned came into question. Out of this recognition and understanding of their shared positionality, participants came to express a symbolic voice, a voice of empowerment, consciousness, resistance, and transformation. A voice of courage that questions and challenges situations. However, to reach this level of consciousness where participants employ symbolic voice, they experienced frequent bouts of silence in collegiate classrooms.

Table 2
Collegiate Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Silence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Black women and Latinas Experience their voice and silence?</td>
<td>Instrumental Voice:</td>
<td>Engaged Silence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Academic Student Behavior (participation, asking questions to clarify academic content, share thoughts perspectives)</td>
<td>• Making sense of thought, ideas, emotions and actions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Raw Tongue:</td>
<td>Holding Silence:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discomfort</td>
<td>• Anxiety with academic performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Deficiency</td>
<td>• Fear of saying the wrong answer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Risk associated with negative stereotype</td>
<td>• Harmful/Stereotype threat</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Visible/Invisible</td>
<td>• Self-doubt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stress/anxiety</td>
<td>Silencing/Being Silenced:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic Voice:</td>
<td>• Combination of Raw tongue and Academic Discourse</td>
<td>• Failure to speak</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shot down by professors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Not heard by professors, student peers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Harmful</td>
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<td>How do Black women and Latinas Understand their voice and silence?</td>
<td>Instrumental Voice:</td>
<td>Engaged Silence:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Self-empowerment, Self-confident</td>
<td>• Learning knowledge acquisition.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Courageous</td>
<td>• Responsibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Challenging/questioning peers and professors with ease</td>
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<td>Raw Tongue:</td>
<td><strong>Discursive Silence:</strong></td>
<td>Holding Silence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Refusal to speak or engage with discussion</td>
<td>• A response to intense feelings associated with the self and learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Deliberate act of empowerment</td>
<td>• Protecting vulnerabilities from peers and professors who they perceived judged them harshly.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Silencing/Being Silenced:</strong></td>
<td>• Fear of fulfilling negative stereotypes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Oppressive</td>
<td><strong>Discursive Silence:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Imposed upon</td>
<td>• Silence that conveys a message, a silence that speaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Voice:</td>
<td><strong>Silence</strong> was initially defined as a negative and disempowering phenomenon associated with learning and oppression/marginalization.</td>
<td>• Resistance to behavior of their peers, discourse and or content of material being discussed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Political voice</td>
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<td>• Right to speak and be heard.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• A multilingual voice that emerged from self-definition, self-awareness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Awareness of multiple identities, outsider-within</td>
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| What meanings do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence? | Instrumental Voice: | Silence | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Positive attributes associated with learning, Knowledge acquisition. | **Silence** was initially defined as a negative and disempowering phenomenon associated with learning and oppression/marginalization. |
| | **Raw Tongue:** Negative meaning related to their ethno-racial identity and culture | |
| | **Symbolic Voice:** Self-empowerment | |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>What do Black women and Latinas perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence?</th>
<th>Voice/Participation/speaking in class still valued over silence</th>
<th>Silence still perceived as a deficiency.</th>
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<td>Participation and speaking was equated to higher grades.</td>
<td>• Lack of knowledge, unprepared academically, lack of understanding, which constitutes lower grades.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Speaking more and engaging the material was understood as a way of improving grades.</td>
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249
All participants agreed that silence is inherent in learning and requires periods of thought and reflection, but silence was also initially considered harmful as well. Silence was initially perceived and described as something negatively associated with their learning. Terms and phrases like lack of engagement, fear, insecurities, lack of confidence, disconnected, unmotivated, anger, disapproval, dislike, avoidance, boredom, self-doubt, day dreaming, lack of information, pressure to talk, concern, inarticulateness were used by participants to describe their silence in collegiate classrooms. However, even though their silence was initially understood as an act of individual choice that had negative attributes, an interesting distinction became evident in the descriptors participants ascribed to their silence. A difference between engaged silence, holding silence, and discursive silence (strategic coded silence) emerged in their collegiate experiences.

As an individual and/or cultural form of expression, participants understood silence to be a voluntary human response. It was perceived as an autonomous, independent act associated with learning and personal growth. Silence and nonverbal communication were particularly important in classroom interactions because the majority of students’ learning took place without talk. “At times I just liked to listen in class and see what other people have to say. I really didn’t think about it [silence], but it actually helps me formulate my answers or think about things” (Eve). “Being silent in class, while I gather my thoughts and listen to other people’s feelings and perspectives, is sometimes effective. I find that I have a better understanding and get another perspective” (Dee). “You know I am still learning, I am learning a lot of things. I realize I am not
where I should be academically, so I am silent and listen to learn because I struggle with a lot of things” (Yoli). “Always saying something is not necessarily important to me at all. I have no problem with just listening and hearing what other people have to say. It’s all about learning” (Jada).

Silence also resulted from unpreparedness and/or boredom. “I really don’t talk much in that class [statistics] because I don’t do enough of the reading to understand what is going on, and I only like to talk when I know what is going on because I feel like I can contribute” (Dee). “I am reluctant to speak and argue on certain things that I have no knowledge or experience with” (Yoli). “If I have not done the reading for the class, I am not going to ask a question because I have always believed the answer is in the reading, if I had done it. I won’t make a fool of myself… but it varies. Half the time I am daydreaming and bored” (Kimora). “If I am bored in class, I just don’t speak up” (Eve).

Classes that are detached from my reality, I feel myself being disinterested and consequently I don’t speak as much… unless I have done all the reading. I have done all the homework, and I know everything there is to know about the subject… if I don’t know it, I should not participate and speak in class. So I choose not to speak most of the time when I don’t feel like I have authority in the subject, when I don’t feel like I can say my opinion strong enough or have enough backing. If I don’t find evidence of what I am saying is correct then I feel like its not important, and so I remain silent. (Violeta)

The inexpressible was not necessarily harmful. In this case, silence was a conscious normative response to learning in the public context of the classroom. Although participants manifested different types of silences, each expressive in its own way, the awareness of being silent for learning and knowledge acquisition is what I call engaged silence.
Engaged Silence

Engaged silence helps participants make sense of thought, ideas, emotions, and actions within classrooms. On the other, participants were also cognizant of being silent to protect themselves from fears and vulnerabilities associated with learning, for example.

If I have low self-efficacy, I am not going to participate in class...I don’t feel confident enough in what I am saying or if don’t feel confident in the topic, I don’t feel confident in my skills in the class, and I will not speak. (Kimora)

Thinking that I should be getting the material and I am not. Thinking that this [lack of understanding] is my problem and I should study more...I didn’t have the confidence to seek the help...I don’t have the confidence to say it [to speak in class] what we talk about is so complex sometimes, I don’t feel like I can put forth anything that will be of value sometimes. (Issy)

It [silence] definitely had a lot to with my background and my mom always telling me on the one hand that I am smart, I am bright, I am beautiful, and on the other hand, saying I am stupid, I don’t know anything. I don’t know what I am doing or talking about. (Eve)

I would say more to the point of challenging someone in the classroom or questioning them, I feel like if I don’t have the authority to say something and if I say something without the authority, I feel like I am shutdown right away by the professors themselves. (Violeta)

I often feel unsure of myself when answering questions, so I don’t even like to do it, but then I find out it’s correct. I guess that is one of the detriments to answering questions in class, sounding stupid. I guess I don’t really like it when all eyes are on me. (Dee)

I chose not to speak because again, I felt like I am not going to put myself out there, so I chose not to really express myself and put my perspective and my experiences out there. (Dalis)

These examples describe what I call holding silence.
Holding Silence

Holding silence is an attitudinal, communicative response to situations that had the potential to diminish and/or remove difficulties that participants experienced with learning in collegiate classrooms. Holding silence also became a response to intense feelings associated with the self (particular anxieties around academic performance, lack of confidence, intense feelings, uncertainty, inarticulate, unable to speak, fear of saying the wrong answer, self-censorship, self-doubt, feeling they have no authority). Instead of revealing their vulnerabilities, they choose to protect themselves from peers and professors who they perceived judged them harshly. However, one can speculate that holding silence/being silent in these examples also resulted from stereotype threat that forced participants to doubt their own intellectual abilities and question whether they belonged in the academic environment of Noel College. Although participants were cognizant of their silence, holding silence also had the potential to be harmful, for example,

You start shutting down, you start not to say anything… At the beginning, I felt I was not saying anything because yo no quiero decir lo que no es [I don’t want to say the wrong answer]. In actuality, what happens is with silence and being silent you start protecting that stereotype, right? I don’t want people to think I am not this and I am not that… so I keep quiet, but what happens is you start internalizing it… In the beginning, I felt I was scared to be confronted as not being intelligent or being looked down upon as fulfilling the stereotype of all my people. So it was a lot of responsibility... You start becoming critical of yourself and holding yourself down. At times I was so pissed off that I could not even blink cause that thing was going to come out, that rawness, and that again would fulfill the stereotype. (Dalis)

Surrounded by 17/18-year-old, White women, you know, I didn’t speak not one word for the whole semester, and that is not like me... being that I was in the classroom with these White women, I didn’t raise my hands not once. It was like I was afraid to speak up maybe intimidated and not as motivated as I was at the community college for some reason. I am kind of reluctant to speak, argue, and comment on certain things that I know nothing about. It was intimidating. They
were intelligent, young women, and I was not going to speak because I felt everyone will zoom in on me, and I was going to look like the older woman who knows nothing...I definitely believe that [being visible/spotlighted] is a component to the reason why I feel reluctant to speak, and it’s almost like I feel I question my being here, as if I didn’t work hard enough to be here...When I don’t speak, I feel like the thoughts get chocked up in me... You are disconnected at times, and you are unable to express your thoughts or clarify points. You feel like you have something to say, but you are reluctant to say it, and you hold it in. You feel like you are being pulled down. You give up on yourself, and it hurts and bothers me. Like there were moments that I knew the answer. I knew what I had to say, and it bothered me that I didn’t say something. So when the professor is talking about it, and you don’t ask about it, and there is no clarity for you, it’s not a good feeling for me. (Yoli)

It almost feels like I don’t want to say something because it might seem to her as its my Latina perspective. But I don’t want it to seem like that, it’s just my perspective, not the perspective of all Latinos/Latinas. (Vikki)

Now that I know that it’s this big thing where you are representing an entire people, maybe unconsciously I am saying well maybe to be quiet, to not say anything, and then embarrass myself and the whole is best. (Kimora)

As a Latina, there is that fear that I say something stupid or I go off on a tangent that it is going to be placed on the fact that I am Latina. Oh, mira essa Latina tan estupida [oh look at that Latina, so stupid], she has no idea what she is talking about. So I prefer to stay quiet, and there is that big part of it too where you just feel like, “I don’t want them to think I am stupid,” and part of it is going to be no matter what I say, my name is Issy, and although my skin is fair, my last name is Ramirez... well people will know, and if I say something dumb, it’s going to be oh essa pober Latina, no sabe que decir nunca [oh that poor Latina, doesn’t ever know what to say]. So if I don’t say something really smart, I prefer not to say anything. (Issy)

Speaking of numerous experiences where they held silence, so as not to fulfill negative stereotypes existing of their ethno-racial identity or group, participants struggled to determine if holding silence/being silent was a conscious choice they enacted or a negative reaction to what was perceived as a hostile/unwelcoming learning environment.

It was not clear that holding silence was helpful in challenging the negative stereotypes of their identities in classroom discussions. Here is where we begin to see the nuances of silence, a shift from a conscious silence associated with learning, and/or an awareness of
being silent (resulting from internal strife) to a silence resulting from marginalization and being Othered/spotlighted in the classroom.

Silencing/Being Silenced

The experiences of the participants suggest that the visible marker of race and its phenotypic characteristics (color, facial characteristics, physical features, and hair) continue to be linked to their competence. Because race, class, and gender continues to shape and affect communicative interactions, the type of racial and class categorizing that occurs in collegiate classrooms creates conditions where participants are silenced.

My first year in a Latin American women writers class, a girl made a comment about Latinos/as within the book, and it was just offensive to me. I really can’t remember the comment, but I remember the incident, and I wanted to say something and I was just discouraged, and I didn’t even have enough confidence in me to really think that this was an important point to make… In another class, I responded to a question posed by the professor, but then the professor was like, “This is not an overwhelming general thing for you to say. This is not the common experience. So you can’t speak for everyone else.” I was like, “Ok,” and after that day I lasted a week without saying anything in class ‘cause I was just so afraid that I was going to say the wrong thing. I was scared to speak because I didn’t know what the response from the classroom [peers] would be and what the professor would actually think… Like my voice wasn’t being heard. What I had to say was not important in the classroom, and I really lost a lot of motivation for completing the coursework. (Violeta)

I question, what is the point of talking in this class? What is the point of participating if every time I bring an idea and I am trying to participate, you are shooting me down! Or someone else says the same thing I said, and I am ignored, and she will get credit for it! This has also contributed to my silence in the classroom. (Eve)

Sometimes they [White students] don’t mean it, but it just pisses me off when something like that comes out when they say something offensive about Latinas like, “Why do they need to have special attention? Why do they? They don’t realize how difficult it is, and so they try to make the argument that we should be treated just as equally as they are, and they shouldn’t have programs like ALANA [African, Latino/a, Asian and Native American]…so I feel there is silence when someone is really ignorant. (Issy)
I laugh rather than get upset. That is all that you can do…Sometimes it’s just so bad you have to laugh because you can’t get upset. Maybe I laugh as to not cry that this is so messed up. It’s so messed up that I don’t even know what to say and so I laugh or I am quiet (Dee).

I think that some professors looked at me as an exotic individual with interesting contributions. They were excited to know who I was and where I am from…I think that at first [when I spoke], it was risky. It felt like I was vulnerable because I didn’t know what the response would be [from my professor and classmates]. I just felt alone in my own contributions, unsupported, unheard, ignored and sometimes silenced as well. (Dalis)

The struggle of who can speak, who is likely to be heard or not heard and therefore silenced were fundamental to the experiences of participants in collegiate classrooms. Silencing within the classroom occurred when participants were shot down and/or not heard and rendered invisible by faculty and student peers. Silencing was not just the absence of voice for participants, it was experienced as a response to the behavior of White peers and faculty who seemed to lack exposure to and an awareness of racial diversity. Unlike holding silence, where participants were aware of being silent, silencing/being silenced was experienced as an imposed phenomenon where power relations manifested in the behaviors and discourses of White peers and professors silenced the communication of participants. Although silencing was perceived as harmful, a distinction between Olson’s (1978) harmful silence and silencing/being silenced is warranted.

Whereas Olson’s (1978) harmful silence implies that an individual has a choice to “remain mute,” silencing, as expressed by Black women and Latina participants, is experienced as a failure to have uttered/said something when they should have. Because there are times, when it is not safe for Black women and Latinas to speak within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College, being silenced created a sense of disempowerment
and frustration. The context by which participants vividly described being silenced resulted from marginalization and powerlessness that one could attribute to the hegemonic racial and socioeconomic dynamics existing within classrooms of Noel College (where White, middle- to upper-class norms are valued and institutionalized). As such, silencing within the classroom also had the ability to racially privilege dominant groups while marginalizing subordinate groups.

Because White peers and faculty were ignorant to the meaning of their silence, participants perceived that their White peers and faculty misinterpreted or dismissed their silence as communicating nothing other than what they (White faculty/student peers) wanted it to mean. As such, participants sought to challenge and resist being silenced, so as not to appear complicit in their own marginalization. Overall, Black women and Latinas in this study were not sure how to refute/challenge subordinating aspects of silence (oppressive, disempowering forms of silence, silence imposed upon), but a few women from this study managed to engage in liberating aspects of silence (resistance to being silenced, not being complicit in their own oppression) to empower themselves within the classroom.

Discursive Silence

Very few women employed discursive silence in classrooms. Participants who did not engage in discursive silence, understood silence as simply a natural process of learning or a result of oppression/marginalization. Many lacked awareness that silence takes on many forms and has the ability to function as a means of resistance to oppression. However, the three women who engaged in discursive silence (Dalas, Eve...
and Violeta) had a strong sense of intellectual self-confidence, agency, and understanding of their ambiguous positionality in classrooms, as outsiders within. They were strategic in using their silence. Whether their discursive silence was recognized by their peers or professors or unrecognized, employing discursive silence was understood as a deliberate act of empowerment and resistance to the behavior of their peers, the discourse and/or content of material being discussed.

A lot of people tell me that you can tell how I feel by the way I look in class. And I was just like, “You know what? I am just going to be quiet because you don’t make any sense right now and I am not about to be that girl, that Black girl that is like, “Oh, my family is on food stamps or I know somebody that is…” No, it’s like, “I don’t need to share or show you things or validate your assumptions of me or what Black people do and I don’t always have to tell you or share my experience with you…Take that!” I have done this in many classes. (Eve)

I wanted to see what people would do. This is also when I became more confident about me and who I am as a women of color. So I became silent in the classroom when they were talking about race and racism. My friend and I decided that we were not going to talk for the next two days because they were going to dialogue about the White perspective and people of color perspective and she and I decided we are not going to say anything during that time and we didn’t. And we can see it was so uncomfortable for the professor and so uncomfortable for the students. (Dalís)

If you are a constant speaker, participator and you choose not to say anything, you know participate in this subject or in this matter, it’s almost like a direct statement saying, “I don’t agree, and I don’t want to be a part of this conversation.” Which to me is even a stronger symbol or message to my peers, but more so to the professor to let him know that I disagree. (Violeta)

Discursive silence was not a failure to speak; it was a refusal to speak and/or engage in the discussion at hand. When one refuses to speak or to engage in a conversation, there is intentionality behind that act. Eve’s unwillingness to share her own experience or to validate a stereotype her peers had of Blacks, Dalís’s refusal to engage in a discussion around race to force her peers to grapple with difficult conversations, and Violeta’s
deliberate silence to send a message to her student peers and professors are all examples of resistance.

Summary

Silence was not as easy to discuss for participants as their experience with voice. For the Black women and Latinas in this study, silence takes on a completely different meaning in collegiate classrooms. Although they all agreed that silence was necessary for learning, engaged silence, holding silence by choice was not easily distinguished from silencing. Distinguishing between a silence that is an individual choice or resulting from marginalization was difficult to determine without understanding the classroom context by which silence is manifested and/or employed. Moreover, for some participants, silence was strategically employed in particular classrooms. Although not all of the participants employed discursive silence, it is important to note that those women who used discursive silence had a sense of agency and intellectual self-confidence to be courageous and refuse to speak or engage in discussions.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

A number of conceptual pieces (Anderson, 2002; Cardoza, 1991; Gloria et al., 1999, Gonzalez et al., 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; King, 2004; Walker et al., 2001) indicate that Black women and Latinas continue to lag behind White and Asian American women in academic enrollment and degree attainment. Factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women and Latinas in the traditional college age population have been attributed to racial and gender stereotypes, institutional climate, admissions criteria, socioeconomic issues, and financial need (Allen, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000, Flannery, 2000; hooks, 1989; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Vasquez, 1997).

Because relatively little is known of how Black and Latina experience the predominantly white collegiate classrooms as learners, this dissertation sought to understand:

- How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in the collegiate classroom?
- What meanings do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence?
- What do Black women and Latinas perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in a politics of voice and silence?

In this final chapter, I will discuss the research findings and the potential impact on the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas in collegiate classrooms. I begin by summarizing and discussing the major findings of the study. Next, I explore the implications the study has on curriculum development, pedagogy, and the bearing on student development. Lastly, I conclude with suggestions for caveats, further research
and concluding remarks. Although the findings are not generalizable to the entire student
Black women and Latina college student population, this study produced some important
findings for consideration with how voice and silence shapes student learning.

**Summary of Major Findings**

The data for this study was collected utilizing in depth phenomenological
interviews with 9 undergraduate women (4 Black women, 4 Latinas and 1 identified as
Afro-Latina) from various majors and class years. The sample included women who
identified as working-class, poor, or middle-class. None of the participants identified
themselves or their families as wealthy/rich. Each participant underwent a series of 3
separate 90-minute intensive and iterative interviews to discuss and reflect on their lived
experience with voice and silence. All participants were in the process of completing
their bachelor’s degree at Noel College during the time of this study.

As a result of the lack of empirical research on the phenomenon of voice and
silence (Iglesias & Cormier, 2002), this study yielded several unique findings about how
voice and silence is experienced and understood in collegiate classrooms (and the
meaning generated) for Black women and Latina participants.

After examining the findings, voice and silence for the participants was
experienced as a multifaceted continuum of human communication that was entangled in
personal, cultural, and political choices and situational aspects. This does not imply that
there was an absolute distinction between voice and silence, but that the inexpressible
was inherent in systems of expressions (silence was inherent in verbal expression) within
collegiate classrooms. Regardless of their distinct ethno-racial identity, socioeconomic
status, and/or academic majors, the findings show that voice and silence were central to
the learning and the development of self of participants.

The socio-contextual features of collegiate classrooms (class size, student
diversity, faculty pedagogy, course content) influenced whether participants voiced their
perspectives with more ease and/or engaged conditions of silence. Internal dynamics
within classrooms, relationships with professors and student peers,
engagement/comprehension of academic materials, lack of/or presence of diversity and
diversity consciousness were some of the external factors that influenced the type of
voice and/or silence participants employed in classrooms, for example. The raw tongue of
participants functioned as a visible marker of their multiple identities as women of color
of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, participant perceived that exercising
their raw tongue would place them at a disadvantage in the collegiate classrooms of Noel
College, where upper-middle-class values are embedded in institutional norms. As a
result of the behavior of student peers and some faculty towards their raw tongue,
participants questioned whether they belonged in these collegiate spaces. Self-doubt and
uncertainty of their intellectual and academic abilities resulted from these interactions
within collegiate classrooms. At the same time, building positive relationships with
student peers and professors, especially faculty of color, helped to develop a symbolic
voice where participants used their raw tongue and academic discourse to engage in
discussions/dialogue with students and faculty. Equally important to note is that voice as
manifested through symbolic voice seemed to be linked to the development of the
participants’ consciousness as women of color, that provided them with the ability to
develop self-expression. Lastly, the conditions of silence (engaged silence, holding
silence, silencing, and discursive silence) that participants experienced within collegiate classrooms were complex, varied, and context dependent but were also influenced by the internal dynamics of colligate classroom which impacted how participants used silence.

Discussion of the Findings

As I reviewed the findings to answer the central research questions (How do Black women and Latinas experience and understand their voice and silence in classrooms? What meaning do Black women and Latinas ascribe to their voice and silence? What do Black women and Latinas perceive to be the academic implications of engaging in politics of voice and silence?), the data illustrate that the phenomenon of voice and silence for this group of Black women and Latina participants is a complex, multidimensional process that is interconnected and loaded with meaning. As such, this study has provided a more nuanced understanding of the complexities associated with negotiating voice and silence in collegiate classrooms for the Black and Latina participants in this study.

The following model attempts to illustrate how the nine women negotiate/navigate voice and silence in response to discomfort or perceived threat in classrooms (green) and when comfort or no threat is perceived in the classroom (blue). “Aha moments” or critical incidents (white) is the process by which the nine women begin the development of a reflexive self. In response to these aha moments, the participants gain a political consciousness that lead to a more enlightened self (pink).
Figure 1. Navigating Voice and Silence in College Classroom
To understand the interconnected and multidimensional process of how the nine participants negotiated and navigated their voice and silence, the model was organized following a progression of how participants viewed/experienced themselves and their deployment of voice and silence in collegiate classrooms. The model begins with the pre-collegiate experience influence (yellow) on self (pink), which refers to the way family, social communities (e.g., friends, church, work, community center), cultural, and educational experiences shape/influence communication patterns/behavior of participants. The model progresses to illustrate how the self (pink) is impacted by classroom experiences (green and blue) and visa versa how the classroom experiences (green and blue) influence on self (pink). Finally, the model illustrates how aha moments (white) lead to the development of an enlightened self (pink).

Negotiating voice and silence involves a learning process influenced by internal collegiate classroom dynamics or as Weaver and Qi’s (2005) refer to as formal classroom structures (class size, faculty as the authority of knowledge, faculty-student interaction and fear or professor’s criticism) and informal classroom structures (fear of peer disapproval, excessive student participation and student attributes) of classrooms. In this study, how participants experienced the classroom appeared to influence what type of voice (instrumental voice, raw tongue, and symbolic voice) and/or silence (engaged silence, holding silence, silencing, and discursive silence) was used and how voice and silence was experienced and understood. In the presence of discomfort and/or perceived threat, participants use their voice and silence very differently from when they experienced comfort and perceived no threat in classrooms, for example. As a response to the ignorance, frustration, and lack of racial sensitivity and/or understanding by some
their White peers and professors, participants used their raw tongue out of anger and frustration of not being heard, understood, or taken seriously in collegiate classrooms. The discomfort experienced within classrooms caused participants to employ a voice that was authentic, real, untrained, honest, filled with emotion and passion that required no-code switching. When participants used their raw tongue as an expression of their voice, they believed their White peers judged them according to unconscious/conscious stereotypes and attitudes. Participants also perceived that their White peers and professors understood their raw tongue as “hostile,” “too firm,” “too ghetto,” and/or unfriendly, which impacted their level of verbal engagement in classrooms. Silence was also employed differently when participants experienced discomfort in collegiate classrooms.

Silence was initially understood as a personal choice that had negative implications associated with their academic/intellectual development. It was initially described as a lack of engagement, fear, insecurities, lack of confidence, anger, disconnection, unmotivated, boredom, self-doubt, disapproval, dislike, avoidance, lack of information, concern with failing, pressure to speak, inarticulateness. As the participants became more reflective and descriptive with their examples of silence, nuances of silence emerged that were manifested differently when Black and Latina participants experienced discomfort or a perceived threat in the classroom, for example. Holding silence was described as a conscious choice to protect and not reveal vulnerabilities (associated with their academic performance) to peers and professors who participants perceived judged them harshly. Experienced as anxiety with academic performance, fear of saying the wrong answer, stereotyped threat, self-doubt, and self-censorship in classroom, holding silence was a response to intense feelings associated with the self and learning. Holding
silence was manifested in classrooms where participants experienced a lack of faculty-student engagement/interaction, a disconnect with the academic material and a lack of racial diversity among student peers. Although participants were cognizant of their silence, holding silence also had the potential to be harmful to participants, particularly when it was manifested as self-doubt resulting from internalized oppression associated with stereotype threat existing in some collegiate classrooms. Participants also spoke of numerous examples of silencing/being silenced.

The participants understood the act of silencing/being silenced as a form of silence that was oppressive and often triggered by faculty criticism, being “shot down” by professors and/or student peers, or not being heard and rendered invisible as a consequence by faculty. Silencing was not just the absence of voice for participants, it was experienced as a reaction to what participants perceived to be negative behaviors of their White peers and a lack of racial consciousness by faculty and students in classrooms. Because silencing/being silenced was understood as disempowering, this type of silence had the potential of negatively impacting the academic/intellectual development of participants. However, collegiate classrooms that were perceived as supportive and encouraging by participants also created comfortable learning environments where participants engaged their instrumental voice and/or engaged silence with relative ease.

Both instrumental voice and engaged silence were experienced as a process of knowledge acquisition, which required participants to exercise moments of silence (to allow time for reflection) and voice, at any given time within collegiate classrooms. Instrumental voice was understood as the ability of Black women and Latina participants
to use their voice, to speak, to verbally participate, and articulate content in classroom spaces. It represented the speech and perspective of the speaker within collegiate classrooms. Their instrumental voice was manifested as an expression of academic student behavior, a part of their learning process, which was required for academic success and higher grades. They employed their instrumental voice to ask questions, clarify academic content, and share comments or perspectives. It was experienced as a process of engaging with their student peers, faculty, and academic materials.

For the participants engaged silence was also understood as a choice to remain silent to make sense of thought, ideas, emotions, actions, and reflections connected to learning and knowledge acquisition in collegiate classrooms. Engaged silence was such a pervasive habitual experience, participants rarely thought of it. As such, classrooms where participants were comfortable with faculty, had positive faculty-student interaction, respectfully engaged faculty and student peers in academic discussion, and their contributions were heard and valued, fostered instrumental voice and/or engaged silence of participants. However, the gradual evolution from a voice to a symbolic voice where participants exerted their right to speak began when participants experienced aha moments or critical incidents.

Aha moments or critical incidents were experienced when participants began to think critically about their sense of self, and their identity in relation to their own lived experience and sociopolitical circumstances. Aha moments resulted from the conversations and/or social interactions participants had with women of color student peers and faculty. Courses taught by faculty, particularly professors of color, led participants to engage in critical reflection and self-reflexivity that created conditions for
aha moments to develop within classrooms. The more participants engaged faculty and student peers in discussions about their shared racial positionality as women of color in U.S. society, the more politically aware participants became. This consciousness-raising is what led to the development of a symbolic voice for participants.

Symbolic voice was a political voice that emerged from self-definition, self-awareness, and a recognition of their multiple identities. It was a voice that challenged, and questioned. It was a voice that combined their raw tongue and the imposed academic discourse of the classroom to engage and/or challenge academic content and/or situations of oppression/marginalization. When participants employed their symbolic voice in classrooms, the fear of being different and/or being the only Black women or Latina in classrooms was insignificant. They spoke as empowered women who recognized and embraced the multiplicity of their identities as “outsiders within,” and “academic self women of color other” in classrooms. As a manifestation of their outsider within, academic self women of color other status, symbolic voice allowed participants to engage and express a transformational politics of the self that was political, exerted agency, and created opportunities for self-expression within collegiate classrooms. This (re)articulation of self led to the development of an enlightened self—a self that employs agency and knowledge rooted in their lived experience to critique arguments, question and engage in dialogue of academic materials.

Some participants also managed to engage in liberating aspects of silence (resistance to being silenced, not being complicit in their own oppression) to empower themselves within the classrooms as well. Despite the fact that few participants engaged in discursive silence, those women who practiced discursive silence were intentional with
their refusal to speak. Their refusal or unwillingness to share their own experience, validate a stereotype, or engage in a discussion around race, to force her White peers to grapple with the difficult conversations were the most noticeable ways that participants engaged in discursive silence in classrooms. Whether their discursive silence was recognized by their peers and professors or unrecognized, employing discursive silence was a deliberate act of empowerment and resistance that also created the opportunity for self-expression of participants. However, unlike the other types of silence that participants manifested, discursive silence was the only form of silence that required that participants simultaneously possess symbolic voice. In order for participants to strategically employ silence, they simultaneous had to know how to engage and/or challenge academic content and/or situations of oppression/marginalization to reach an enlightened self; a self of empowerment and agency that used voice and silence strategically in classrooms to engage and challenge student peers and faculty on academic material.

The pattern of response illustrated in this model challenges the notion that negotiating voice and silence is a linear step-by-step developmental process embedded in knowledge acquisitions or “ways of knowing” (Belenky et al., 1986). As the model illustrates, voice and silence functioned as a multidimensional interconnected process of human communication. Both voice and silence were simultaneously employed in collegiate classrooms because the inexpressible is inherent in systems of expressions (silence was inherent in verbal expression). However, the nuances of voice and silence that Black and Latina participants manifested in collegiate classrooms resulted from positive and negative relationships with faculty, faculty-student interactions in
classrooms, lack of diversity and racial consciousness of peers and some faculty, White privilege/entitlement of student peers and/or faculty and stereotype threat. All these factors shaped whether participants experienced discomfort (perceived threat) or comfort (no perceived threat) in collegiate classrooms, which ultimately determined which form of voice and silence was used and how it was experienced. Additionally, academic interactions and relationships with women of color student peers and faculty of color created situations (aha moments/critical incidents) that led participants to engage in consciousness-raising. This political awareness fostered self-confidence and self-efficacy to employ symbolic voice and/or discursive silence that created an enlightened self. As such, this research makes an important contribution to the literature in the area of student voice, silence, and classroom dynamics.

Whereas most of the literature connects voice (in academic settings) with participation, engagement, learning, and knowledge acquisition for students (Astin, 1993; Belenky et al., 1996; Howard, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005), and silence with a lack of engagement and ignorance (Montoya, 2009), this study suggests that the development of voice and silence is not necessarily a result of cognitive development or how much knowledge an individual possess or lacks. This study suggests that voice and silence is a complex, interconnected process of human communication that is impacted by classroom dynamics influencing how participants understand and experience the self as students of color.

As the model illustrates, how voice and silence was used and experienced in classrooms was based on how participants experienced themselves/the self as students of color in predominantly White collegiate classrooms. The internal dynamics of classrooms
and the negative and/or positive racial perceptions held of Black and/or Latino groups by participants themselves and their student peers shaped how voice and silence were employed, experienced and understood by participants. Although knowledge and learning were inherent in the voice and silence of participants, the nuances of voice and silence that participants manifested resulted from their attempts to make sense of the self/their identities in comfortable and/or uncomfortable academic collegiate classrooms. As such, the progression from self to an enlightened self comes with the development of a political consciousness that embraces their multiple identities, exerts agency and confidence while critiquing arguments, questioning, and engaging in dialogue of the academic material being studied. As a result, the voice and silence of participants is never neutral or without meaning because voice and silence functioned as an extension/expression of the self (their multiple identities) within collegiate classrooms. Hence, in an effort to retain and help make the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas more favorable, institutions and faculty could work towards developing instructional materials and diverse curriculum and teaching practices that foster respect for cultural differences and engage variant learning styles to allow voice and silence to emerge organically

**Connecting the Findings to the Literature**

When I embarked on this research to investigate the phenomenon of voice and silence for Black women and Latinas in women’s college classrooms, the limited research on this phenomenon required that I conduct an interdisciplinary survey of existing literature and empirical studies in the field of higher education, secondary education, communications, women/gender studies, and critical social theory. Reviewing
the literature across diverse disciplines and fields of study allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how Black and Latina participants understood, experienced, and made meaning of the phenomenon of voice and silence. The data collected from the phenomenological interviews reveal that themes generated were, in fact, consistent with much of the interdisciplinary literature on voice, silence, student participation, women as learners, and collegiate classroom environments that informed this study.

During the first set of interviews, participants were asked to share their experience of family and social communities, while reflecting on their pre-collegiate educational experience. The combination of reconstructing and exploring the past to clarify how voice and silence were understood and experienced revealed that Black and Latina participants entered the collegiate classrooms of Noel College were shaped by a particular linguistic habitus. The theme, *Linguistic Habitus of Black Women and Latinas*, explains how their social communities and membership in particular ethno-racial groups influenced the participants’ communicative patterns.

In accordance with Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of linguistic habitus, distinct cultural and social patterns of socialization manifest themselves in ways that impact a person’s ability to speak and interact in educational classrooms/public settings. The fact that these women were raised in working-class, ethno-racially diverse, speech communities provided them with specific dispositions that created their raw tongue. Like Anzaldúa’s (1987) home tongue, raw tongue is a form of verbal expression that is intricately linked to their identity. As a form of cultural expression, the raw tongue of participants was acquired through a process of socialization. The social institutions of family and social communities provided the frame by which Black and Latina
participants were able to experience the self and identify with the values of their family and immediate community. Thus, also supporting Alcoff’s (2006) argument that the way individuals understand and process information is not necessarily neutral or independent from the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which the process take place. As such, Black and Latina participants spoke in raw tongue in both private and public spheres because that is all they knew. They spoke openly and truthfully. They clearly articulated things about themselves, what they felt, thought, and desired. Although class and racial variations contributed to linguistic differences, the raw tongue employed by participants was understood as a source of strength and confidence that allowed them to comfortably articulate and remain grounded in their ethno-racial identity as Jamaican, Puerto Rican, African American women during the pre-collegiate experience. When it comes to understanding silence in the pre-collegiate experiences of the participants, the findings did not support Bourdieu’s (1977) premise that silence for participants resulted from the lack of linguistic capital or Hayes’ (2000) and Iglesias and Cormier’s (2002) research that suggests with a “loss of voice, also comes a loss of self” (p. 259).

Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of linguistic habitus suggests that individuals from lower socioeconomic status are silenced because they lack the linguistic capital of the upper-middle-class (*petit bourgeois*), which Bourdieu considered to be the legitimate means of expression. The language/dialects to which the participants were exposed did not force them towards a silence based on a lack of linguistic capital. Overall, the silence experienced by participants during their early education was a deliberate human performance associated with learning. The cultivation of critical thinking abilities and analytical problem-solving skills required that students engage in silence in order to listen
and process information. Silence was not always inactivity for these women. Because learning required periods of silence and reflection, Black women and Latinas understood their silence simply to be an individual response to learning, knowledge acquisition, or a lack thereof, which often resulted in boredom. At this early stage in their lives, the participants did not perceive their silence to be connected to or resulting from stereotypes. As such, they did not experience a “loss of self.” Although a few of the participants spoke of cultural pressures to be silent (Issy and Kimora), it was not clear in the findings whether the silence employed in high school/pre-collegiate classrooms resulted from dispositions learned from families and communities. Further research is required.

Similarly, when exploring the major themes/sub themes expressed by participants about collegiate classrooms, *The Bitter Sweetness of Collegiate Classrooms, Lack of Racial Diversity and Consciousness of Student Peers and Faculty, White Privilege and Entitlement, Situational Identity/Stereotype Threat*, they too were consistent with the literature on institutionalized classroom culture and students of color. As part of the larger social structure, participants experienced an institutionalized classroom culture that severely limited their ability to engage and participate in discussions. Weaver and Qi’s (2005) argument that college classrooms, like any other workplace, is a social organization where power is asserted, tasks are assigned (by professors) and negotiated (by students) directly influencing student behaviors, supports the participants’ experiences at Noel College.

Participants described experiencing a cultural collision/cultural shock within the collegiate classrooms of Noel College. They described the collegiate classrooms of Noel
College as space for learning that marginalizes, makes them feel isolated, undervalued, spotlighted and or unrecognized because of the Lack of Racial Diversity and Consciousness of Student Peers and Faculty. As a product of formal Western educational systems, participants viewed the classrooms of Noel College as exhibiting forms of racial and class bias. Winkler-Wagner (2009) described this when she argues “Social structures and social inequalities outside of higher education influence the experiences of students, particularly underrepresented students in higher education” (p. 28). The interactions with White peers led participants to believe that they were being measured and judged by White norms and practices. In this case, the institutionalized assumptions, attitudes, and practices of Noel College had a kind of invisible effect in systematically giving members of more powerful groups certain advantages, hence supporting the theme, White Privilege and Entitlement; participants began to question their academic abilities. They began to second-guess themselves. According to hooks (1989), “When students must use all their psychic energy to hold their sense of themselves, they don’t have energy left for their studies and their motivation to learn can potentially suffer (p. 76). All the participants were talented women who, despite evidence of their academic competencies felt inadequate, like imposters in the classroom, which is consistent with Arsonson et al.’s (1999) research that found the effects of stereotype threat most profound among students with a high degree of investment in academics. Upon entering the collegiate classrooms of Noel College, the participants also underwent a shift where they began to see their linguistic competencies as deficiencies. They believed that their raw tongue and their forms of verbal expression were not acceptable in the collegiate classrooms of Noel College.
The analysis of the examples, descriptions, and experiences given by participants of their voice produced themes of *Instrumental Voice, Academic Student Behavior, Raw Tongue, Risk and Responsibility: Self-monitoring behavior, Symbolic Voice, Consciousness Raising: The Process of Critical Reflection and Self-Reflexivity, (Re)articulation of the Self: New Consciousness*. These themes again are consistent with and support the literature of student participation, women development theory and Black and Latina feminists on the relationship of voice with women’s identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence. However, the findings diverge slightly from the literature, on how Black women and Latinas manifest voice.

Voice for participants was experienced as an instrumental voice, raw tongue, and symbolic voice. Instrumental voice for participants represents their speech and perspective in classrooms. It is literally the “use” of voice, the ability of participants to talk, to verbally participate, and to articulate academic content. The instrumental voice of participants was manifested as academic student behavior. Why participants participated and spoke in class was consistent with the literature on collegiate classrooms and student participation that suggests that social contextual features of the classroom (class size, faculty pedagogy, faculty-student interactions, diversity) and academic preparation impact student participation (Astin, 1993; Howard, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Instrumental voice was facilitated by participants’ level of academic preparation and the relationships forged with professors. Being comfortable was an essential component of expressing their instrumental voice. Participants were more likely to speak in classrooms where a relationship with instructors had been established. These factors created safe spaces where participants developed intellectual self-confidence, and they were
comfortable to voice their ideas. Although collegiate classrooms functioned to cultivate learning and academic skills, the greatest challenge for participants within the predominantly White, competitive classrooms of Noel College was that their raw tongue became a marker of their racial and class difference.

For Black and Latina participants, speaking in classrooms was a complicated process. Because language is so intricately linked to identity and cultural expressions of a people, “ethnic identity becomes twin skin to linguistic identity” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59). When Black and Latina participants used their raw tongue as an expression of their voice, they were spotlighted or ignored in classrooms by White peers and some professors. How White peers looked at and understood participants was connected to how they heard them within collegiate classrooms. Because participants perceived that White peers reduced the voice to their ethno-racial/social identity, participants began to question and doubt their own academic abilities. “Loudness, anger, emotional outburst and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable vulgar disruptions of classroom social order” (hooks, 1994, p. 178). Because the way of seeing and hearing the world for some White students was also saturated in racial bias/prejudice and economic privilege (hooks, 1994), participants believed who was able to speak and who was likely to be heard within collegiate classrooms of Noel College had as much to do with class, as it did with race. These women believed that a particular type of voice was required in order to speak, to be heard, and to be taken seriously within classrooms of Noel College. This finding was consistent with Bizzell’s (1991) and hooks’ (1994) analysis of academic culture.
Possessing verbal skillfulness within classrooms has been perceived as a marker of intellectuality and academic/social capital (Bizzell, 1991). Because there is a cultural milieu within predominantly White institutions that privileges upper-middle-class, White norms, people who bring difference/diversity to these institutions often feel forced to surrender all values associated with their backgrounds and to adopt/employ dominant characteristics that are valued within those institutions (hooks, 1994; Winkler-Wagner, 2009). One of those valued characteristics was participating in the academic discourse to facilitate speaking in collegiate classrooms. Academic discourse consisted of ways of thinking and using language that prevail in the academy (Bizzell, 1991). It is based on standard-English that is shaped by bourgeois values, attitudes, social relations and biases that inform how knowledge would be discussed, given and received (hooks, 1994). For the first time in their academic careers, participants were forced to learn a different language from their raw tongue. The academic discourse that participants felt they were forced to employ was not of their own choosing, but rather, it was imposed by the institution, peers, and professors. Winkler-Wagner (2009) argues that institutions impose identities on students of color, which forces them to change. Because their communication patterns often determined how they were perceived in collegiate classrooms, participants became more conscious of what they said and how they expressed themselves. As such, they experienced their voice as a risk and a responsibility.

Every time participants spoke in collegiate classrooms, they perceived their voice as a risk of potentially fulfilling a negative stereotype of their particular ethno-racial group. At the same time, participants felt a responsibility also to speak and demonstrate that Black and Latinas could successfully enter and complete college. The responsibility
to speak and attempt to dispel/undo the negative stereotypes that their peers and/or professors may have had, also forced Black women and Latina participants to modify their behavior. Winkler-Wagner (2009) suggested that predominantly White institutions create a necessity of self-monitoring by creating a system of rewards and sanctions. “As one acts there is a level of self-monitoring that occurs almost simultaneously with the act. One monitors the act so that it fits within existing socialized norms, values or ways of being… only certain ways of speaking, thinking and acting are rewarded or recognized by institutions.” (p. 41). As such, the anxiety, discomfort, and uneasiness that participants experienced was not by happenstance; it was institutionalized.

The second manifestation of voice, *Symbolic Voice*, as described by participants was understood as an expression of self-empowerment and agency. The analysis of the examples, descriptions and experiences given by participants described symbolic voice as the right to speak and be heard. It is a multilingual voice that emerged from self-definition, self-awareness, and recognition of their multiple identities and shared positionality as women of color in this society. hooks (1989) specifically refers to this as “transgressive speech,” the act of “talking back,” where a movement from object to subject leads to a liberated voice (p. 9). The symbolic voice of participants is calculated, deliberate, and courageous. When participants speak in their symbolic voice, fear of being different and or being the only Black and/or Latina in classrooms is insignificant. Symbolic Voice becomes a form of linguistic resistance within the predominantly White classroom of Noel College, where a combination of their raw tongue and the traditional academic discourse is employed to challenge oppressive situations and to “talk back.” In their symbolic voice, participants embraced the multiplicity of their identity by using the
fluidity of their languages and strategically code switching to express their perspectives in classrooms. Central to the development of a symbolic voice was a process of self-transformation through consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising takes on special relevance within the context of self-transformation for participants. Describing how oppressed individuals formulate a critical analysis of structural oppression, Freire (1970) and a number of Black and Latina feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989, 1994) argue that the capacity to change inequities within the lived experience and sociopolitical environment of individuals is based on critical reflection and self-reflexivity. “While all reflection implies an element of critique, critical reflection refers to challenging, questioning and even resisting the validity of those beliefs previous learned” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 4). Essential to the process of self-reflexivity is the act of self-examination followed by action. Participants who engage in self-reflexivity underwent a radical change of the self because it required that individuals not only question forces that shape their life and acquired identities, but similar to Black/Latina feminist, it allows individuals to transform their identity into a more autonomous self-constructed identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Awkward, 2006; hooks, 1989, 1994).

As participants developed a symbolic voice, they found themselves in an in-between space, a shifting space, where they attempted to make sense of the ambiguous contradictory roles of their racial identities. For the first time, Black women and Latina participants grappled with understanding, re-configuring, and re-articulating the distinctions between their “self perceived inside self and outside identity” (Deuax, 1993, p. 248). In doing so, Black women and Latina participants became aware of their
otherness as students. They had no choice but to develop a particular way of seeing their reality within collegiate classrooms. hooks (1984) best captures the unique standpoint that outsider within status generates. In describing her small-town Kentucky upbringing, she notes, “Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out…we understood both” (p. vii) and the struggle of living in two lives, one for “them and one for ourselves” (Collins, 2000 p. viii). Orozco-Mendoza (2008) further describes the new consciousness that develops in women who embrace Anzaldúa’s (1987) *mestiza* consciousness/borderland consciousness.

Having a *mestiza* consciousness/Borderland consciousness means that all the previous processes have prepared the self to engage, to abandon previous feelings of victimization and to replace them with reason and political action…thus the person who previously lived as a colonized being, as someone devalued and stigmatized by the logic of domination no longer accepts to play that role no longer accepts impositions and marginalization…She instead utilizes her voice to define herself, to speak for herself. (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008, p. 53)

Part of acquiring a new consciousness *nueva consciencia* and accepting the strengths and struggles of their *mestiza*/borderland consciousness, of their multiple consciousness, of their outsider-within status of having an “academic self and woman of color other” (Asher, 2001) required that participants rupture, break away, reject images, and messages and systemic discourses of inferiority (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984) to embrace what Collins (2000) refers to as an interconnected process of self-definition and self-valuation of their fluid, multiple identities.

Self definition involved challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. In contrast, self valuation stresses the content of Black women’s self definitions—namely, replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images. (Collins, 1986, p. S16-S17)
Through interactions and conversations with women of color of various class and ethnoroacial backgrounds, Black women and Latina participants began their process of consciousness-raising and became more aware of the externally-defined dehumanizing and controlling images of their womanhood. Moreover, the political consciousness obtained through courses, the exchange of knowledge, and social interactions (that consisted of sharing their stories, life experiences) with other women of color offered participants opportunities to be self-reflexive and examine dynamics of interconnected forces of race, gender, class, and marginality that shape their lives as women of color.

The exploration of the examples that participants provided to discuss and describe their silence within collegiate classrooms generated the themes *Silence(s), Engaged Silence vs. Holding Silence, Silencing/Being Silenced* and *Discursive Silence*

Silence as described by the participants was a complex multifaceted phenomenon that manifests itself differently in specific contexts. Because silence is difficult to interpret and generally understood simply as a failure to say something, the nuances of silence are often overlooked. Although there is validity in this interpretation, this monolithic view of silence conceals the complexities and intricacies experienced by participants. Like voice, the silence(s) manifested by participants support Montoya’s (2009) argument that silence is communicative because much of the meaning of our interactions is transmitted through nonverbal gestures (e.g., smiles, frowns, hand gestures). However, within the educational context of collegiate classrooms, silence became loaded with meaning for participants. Although all participants agreed that silence was necessary for learning, interesting nuances were apparent in their descriptions of silence.
Participants manifested different types of silences, all expressive in their own way. Engaged silence, holding silence, and discursive silence were forms of silences that emerged from the agency of participants whereas silencing/being silenced was experienced as an oppressive silence resulting from marginalization and a sense of disempowerment within classrooms. Hurtado’s (1996) research on women of color and learning also suggests that silence has different meanings in various settings.

When participants chose to engage silence in classrooms, it was a conscious choice to help them make sense of their thoughts, ideas, emotions, and actions connected to their learning within classrooms. Holding silence was also a conscious choice to help students protect themselves so as not to reveal their vulnerabilities to peers and professors who they perceived would judge them harshly. Holding silence for participants also had the potential to create harmful silences.

Harmful silence as defined by Olsen (1978) as when individuals remain mute, letting what needs to be expressed die within them. Participants spoke of numerous examples where they held silence so as not to fulfill negative stereotypes existing of their ethno-racial group. Although participants “remained mute” and were conscious of their silence, it was not clear whether holding silence challenged the negative stereotypes existing of their identities in classrooms. It was also not clear if holding silence made participants complicit in their own marginalization. However, some participants did employ a discursive silence.

Discursive silence was described as a deliberate and calculated act of silence, a strategy of resistance to challenge dominant narratives about women of color and people of color and their positionality in society. It was understood as an act of resistance or
defiance. It is a silence that is coded, that conveys a message or, as Zemblyas and Michaelides (2004) state, “It carries meaning even by virtue of its being an absence (of speech) it can ‘say’ something merely by leaving something unsaid.” (p. 194). The few participants who employed discursive silence began to reframe the interpretation of silence as something that is empowering and not always resulting from oppression, humiliation, or complicity in their marginalization. Clair and Montoya (1994) refer to this process as “organization of silence, ways in which interests, issues and identities of marginalized people are silenced and how those silence voices can be organized to be heard” (p. 862). Thus, the findings on discursive silence support Fordham’s (1993), Montoya’s (1994) and Gal’s (1991) research on liberating aspects of silence that challenge dominant discourses and function as a strategy of resistance.

Although everyone is born with some means of articulating or speech, some people can lose speech or their ability to communicate positively in society because of marginality and oppression (Davies, 1995). When participants described experiences of silencing and being silenced, it resulted from being shot down by professors, not heard, and being rendered invisible by peers and professors in classrooms. It was a silence imposed by others that led participants to lack agency to question or challenge professors and/or peers. Montoya (1994) describes this silencing as forms of cultural suppression and racial privileging by White students and professors.

Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

What are the implications of this study for curriculum and pedagogy? How can providing opportunities in the curriculum to talk about diversity, difference, race, and to
learn about racism contribute to the academic development and retention of Black women and Latinas students/students of color, especially when the majority of students are White? How can this study be used to improve/shape classroom pedagogy?

Much of the discomfort and alienation experienced by participants resulted from negative faculty-student interactions in classrooms, lack of diversity and racial consciousness of peers and faculty, White privilege/entitlement of student peers and/or faculty and stereotype threat existing in collegiate classrooms. Because much of the way participants experienced collegiate classrooms was determined by their interactions and academic engagement with faculty and student peers, having curricula that address diverse cultures, abilities, and experiences can provide all students with exposure to diverse perspectives. Incorporating scholarly works by people of color (and other targeted groups) in the curriculum has the ability to heighten diversity awareness of White students enrolled in these courses and to empower Black women, Latinas, and other students of color.

Much of the frustration experienced by participants stemmed from the lack of diversity awareness or racial consciousness of their student peers. If institutions and faculty work to diversify the curriculum, it is likely that White students who learn about diversity and engage in cross-cultural discussions can help create a climate where students of color and other marginalized groups feel more comfortable. White students who have the opportunity to learn about cultural difference, racism, whiteness, and oppression will also be better equipped to create supportive learning environments that can potentially minimize feelings of isolation where students of color feel unheard and silenced. At the same time, students of color who are exposed to diverse curricula may be
able to engage in self-reflexivity to examine how racism, sexism, and other oppressions affect their own lives. This consciousness can provide a space where students of color can voice and share their understanding of how multiple forms of oppression have impacted their lives. As such, exposure to diversity within the curriculum can also move students of color from a place of disempowerment and victimization to a place of empowerment/self-confidence where they engage symbolic voice and/or discursive silence. However, where curricula fall short in addressing diversity or when institutions reflect cultural insensitivity, faculty can become more supportive by creating educational spaces that allow for safe, meaningful exchanges among students. One way this could be accomplished is by employing pedagogies that support and promote collaborative learning environments where students’ ideas, voices, and contributions to knowledge are heard and acknowledged.

Participants in this study shared experiences of racial exclusion and isolation in college classrooms at the hands of predominantly White faculty. This issue raises legitimate concern for faculty engaging students of color in classrooms. Faculty/educators must be mindful that their failure to intervene and engage difficult conversations around racism, sexism, and other oppressions in classrooms sends a message to students. If faculty fail to pay attention to racial dynamics within classrooms, harmful and destructive patterns can emerge. While some conflict inevitably occurs in diverse collegiate classrooms, it is important that faculty engage in teaching practices/pedagogies that value and include rather than exclude students from racially diverse backgrounds. By validating students’ cultural identities and diverse experiences in classroom practices and instructional materials, faculty can potentially succeed in
creating good classroom relations that attract and maintain the interest of students/students of color, while establishing a climate of comfort and self-expression. This could be achieved by faculty by encouraging and supporting students of color in their academic pursuits, leading open and guided discussions on race (without spotlighting students of color), and allowing opportunities for students to share their lived experience and knowledge so as not to repudiate their own cultural identity. Having faculty of color in classrooms is equally important in creating comfortable classroom. As mentors, professor of color played a crucial role in the academic development of participants. Faculty who serve as mentors and advocates to students of color can help validate their academic experience and affirm their existence in predominantly White college settings.

Finally, faculty should not assume that silence in classrooms is an absence of voice. When faculty observe silence, they do not always recognize its value and tend to dismiss it as a lack of understanding or academic disengagement. As such, it is important that faculty realize that silence is not necessarily a bad thing. There is pedagogical value in creating spaces for silence in teaching practices that allows students the opportunity for thought and reflection.

Although students benefit from varied experiences where learning and personal development go hand in hand, it is not sufficient to confine race relations, multiculturalism, social justice, and diversity teaching to classrooms. Congruent messages from academic and student affairs practitioners could support a more diverse and comfortable academic environment and promote student development for Black women, Latinas, and other students of color.
Implications for Student Development

What are the implications of this study on student development? How can this study raise awareness to empower students to become agents of social change? Participants often expressed that the lack of exposure to racial diversity of their White peers triggered feelings of frustration and exhaustion. The lack of racial diversity of their White peers meant that participants felt responsible of educating and raising awareness around diversity. These conversations that emerged around race within classrooms created a great deal of discomfort because participants became visible/spotlighted and felt their comments were generalized by White peers towards their ethno-racial group. In other words, they became the spokesperson for their racial and ethnic group. The over-emphasis and focus on the physical presence and verbal responses of participants created classroom dynamics that heightened their sense of alienation, impacting how they engaged students and faculty through their use of voice/silence. In an effort to reduce feelings of isolation, alienation, incompatibility, and perceived hostility from White peers, academic and student affairs practitioners could work to affirm student learning and student development.

Campus communities that value and promote an understanding of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusivity could become more supportive of students of color by providing workshops/forums to engage students in transformative learning and empower students to become agents of social change. Inviting speakers of color to add diversity education to campus programs and speak of their lived experience as agents of effective
social change could contribute to personal growth, inclusive and intentional learning for students. White students could be better equipped to serve as allies to students of color and students of color could learn strategies of empowerment where they learn to express themselves with no inhibitions. Honoring voice is important for students who belong to targeted/subordinate/marginalized groups. As the findings suggest, when voice is not heard or is devalued in curricula/teaching practices, students could feel silenced, disempowered, and undervalued. Creating and supporting co-curricular programs that acknowledge students’ diverse experiences and cultures in a positive light could invite students to engage and participate more in classroom and co-curricular activities.

By supporting curricula and co-curricular activities that promote cultural, social, academic, and creative expressions, academic and student affairs practitioners could also assist students in gaining a deeper understanding of their own skills, capacities, and competences to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions about race and racial diversity. Moreover, academic and student affairs practitioners could promote positive student development by acknowledging the nuances of voice and silence (in leadership programs/model, advising sessions, mentoring relationships) and understanding that certain types of silence and cultural specific modes of expression (raw tongue) could empower students to become effective and active change agents. None of the participants in this study became empowered on her own; rather, relationships with other students of color, professors of color, and allies within classrooms and co-curricular programs/activities allowed for the development of symbolic voice and self-empowerment. As such, positive student development could result when students of color
learn to value, rather than devalue themselves and their contributions in curricular and co-curricular settings.

Caveats

Because phenomenology does not produce generalizable data, the findings of this research were limited to the sample of participants interviewed. Nine women from one women’s college formed the basis for my findings and implication. As such, they could not be considered to represent all Black women and Latinas, any more than one women’s college could be representative of all colleges and universities. Moreover, because the data collected were self-reported, the data contained several potential sources of bias that could be noted as limitations, for example. Some of the participants could have experienced selective memory, where they remember or do not remember experiences and or events that occurred, and/or recalling events that occurred at one time as if it occurred at another time. Potential for exaggeration or embellishing events was also possible. Nevertheless, this study provided a window through which to understand the experiences of voice and silence of Black women and Latina participants where one can glean meaningful information for the improvement of curriculum, pedagogy, and educational practices for student development.

Suggestions for Future Research

As a result of this study, the following suggestions for future research have emerged. Examining the major differences existing between how Black women and Latinas experience and understand voice and silence is warranted. Although this study
highlighted the complexities of Black and Latina participants in college, this research focused on the commonality of how the phenomenon of voice and silence was experienced and understood, rather than on the differences. One of the noted differences between Black women and Latinas with respect to voice is that for Latinas voice in collegiate classroom settings was always experienced as a foreign/external process because Spanish was their emotional language rooted in their ethno-racial identity. Examining the phenomenon of voice and silence for first-generation Black women and Latinas would add another layer of complexity to understand the phenomenon of voice and silence.

Further research on hearing voices of marginalized groups is required. Participants shared numerous examples of not being heard in predominantly White institutions. Investigating how student peers and faculty hear and understand the voices of diverse students can be significant in understanding how Black women and Latina student learner experience collegiate classrooms.

Replicating this study in one of the Historically Black Women’s Colleges should be conducted to determine if institutional type impacts how Black women and Latina students engage their voice and silence.

Concluding Remarks

In my attempts to understand how Black women and Latina participants experience, understand, and make meaning of their voice and silence in collegiate classrooms, voice and silence was not experienced or understood as simply the right to speak or a loss of voice. Although, for the purpose of explaining the findings, voice and
silence was presented as a bifurcated concept/phenomenon, in this study, voice and silence should be understood more or less as an expression of human communication that is complex, interconnected, and multidimensional. The complex manifestations of voice and silence reflect how the social context of collegiate classrooms and culture impact learning and how participants perceived themselves as ethno-racially diverse students in a predominantly White institution. Although participants perceived that their gendered identity was welcomed at Noel College, their ethno-racial identity felt unwelcomed in classrooms. Hence, how participants experienced and perceived the collegiate classroom not only had a direct impact on how voice and silence was employed, experienced, and understood, but it also influenced how participants understood themselves as Black women and Latina student learners.

The nuances of voice (instrumental voice, raw tongue, symbolic voice) and silence (engaged silence, holding silence, silencing/being silenced, and discursive silence) that participants experienced and manifested could at best be understood as conscious and unconscious strategies of navigating the internal dynamics of the collegiate classrooms, while grappling with understanding their multiple identities as outsiders-within. In other words, voice and silence was not necessarily a result of how much knowledge an individual possess or lacks. It functioned as an extension of participants’ ethno-racial identity/multiple identity. As such, the voice and silence of participants was never neutral because it functioned as a linguistic/communicative marker of their ethno-racial difference in predominantly White classrooms. What was said or not said always had meaning, whether it was self-imposed or imposed by student peers and/or faculty.
Voice and silence of participants was always connected to the ethno-racial identities they possessed.

However, as the study suggests, “aha moments” experienced during social and academic interactions with women of color student peers and professors led participants to engage in consciousness-raising and self-reflexivity to ultimately develop an enlightened self—a self of empowerment and agency that used voice and silence strategically in classrooms to engage and challenge student peers and faculty on academic material. Thus, ethno-racial-cultural identities are crucial dimensions of voice and silence for Black women and Latina participants. Experiencing their voice being honored within the classrooms and being heard and valued held special significance for these nine women. These experiences contributed to the development of intellectual self-confidence. Although, creating comfortable and welcoming classrooms are important, incorporating student voices and engaging their silence(s) in curriculum and pedagogy can potentially assist in the retention and academic and student development of marginalized groups. As such, further study on how the phenomenon of voice and silence impacts student learning is warranted.
APPENDIX A

LETTER TO THE DEAN OF STUDENTS AT NOEL COLLEGE

Date

Dear Dean:

My name is Shelly A. Perdomo; I am currently a doctoral candidate within the department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I would like to take this opportunity to request your assistance with a study I would like to conduct at your institution with some of your students. My proposed study, *Unpacking Voice and Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women and Latinas in College Classrooms* seeks to examine the relationship between voice and silence as it relates to the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas within a women’s college classroom.

This study will consist of three separate 90-minute in-depth interviews with the participants who choose to volunteer for the study. Based on the phenomenological method, I have devised a series of questions that will focus on the participants’ life history, their current experience within the classroom and the meaning the participants’ give to their academic experience. In order to begin to conduct interviews by mid to late February 2008, I would like to request your assistance with following items:

- That the enclosed invitation letter be disseminated via email to all Black women and Latinas who are currently Juniors and Seniors at your institution.
- The numeric breakdown of Black women and Latinas attending your institution in 2007-2008 academic year.
- The numeric breakdown of Black women and Latinas who are currently Juniors and Seniors.

Once interviews are conducted, the data collected will be shared with my dissertation Chair and Committee members. Pseudonyms will be utilized to protect and maintain the confidentiality of all participants and the College as well.

In conclusion, as an alum of Mount Holyoke College (’98), this study will be beneficial not only to students, but to faculty and the institution, as it has the ability to provide a nuanced perspective on retaining Black women and Latinas within Women’s Colleges. If you require further information about this study, I welcome the opportunity to meet. You can contact me with any questions and or to arrange a meeting at the following number/email:

**Cellular:** 413-210-2909     **Email:** saperdom@educ.umass.edu

You can also reach my **Dissertation Chair:**

**Dr. Benita J. Barnes,** University of Massachusetts, Amherst
255 Hills South, Department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration,
Higher Education
111 Infirmary Way, 413-545-1083, barnesbj@educ.umass.edu

Sincerely,
Shelly A. Perdomo, M.Ed.
Dear Student:

My name is Shelly A. Perdomo; I am a doctoral candidate within the department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I would like to take this opportunity to formally invite you to take part in a study to examine the relationship between voice and silence as it relates to the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas within Women’s College classrooms. The purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of how Black women and Latinas make sense of their academic classroom experience within a predominantly white single sexed institution.

This study will consist of **three separate 90-minute interviews**. The first set of interviews will focus on your life history. The second set will examine your current experience within the classroom and the third set of interviews will require you to reflect on the meaning you give to your academic experience.

Realizing the demands of your academic schedule, **I want to request that you identify three dates and time (with 3 days to a week apart) to conduct the interviews.** Remember, scheduling these interviews should be to your convenience. The information shared during these sessions will be digitally recorded, transcribed, and saved on a USB drive and a password protected computer that only I, the primary researcher has access to. Pseudonyms will be utilized to protect your identity within this study.

Possible benefits of this research include: gaining a deeper understanding of your academic experience, becoming aware of the many socio-contextual factors that shape your academic classroom experience and the ability to reflect critically on your experience at a women’s college.

Please note that your participation with this study is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue or refuse participation at any time without penalty or prejudice. If you are interested in participating in this study, please send me an email or call me. Once again, I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation and gratitude for taking the time to read this invitation letter. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Shelly A. Perdomo, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Administration/Feminist Certificate Scholar
saperdom@educ.umass.edu
413-210-2909 (Cellular)
APPENDIX C

INVITATION LETTER TO CO-CHAIRS OF CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

Date

Dear Co-Chairs:

My name is Shelly A. Perdomo; I am a doctoral candidate within the department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I would like to take this opportunity to formally invite you to take part in a study to examine the relationship between voice and silence as it relates to the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas within women’s college classrooms. The purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of how Black women and Latinas make sense of their academic classroom experience within a predominantly white single sexed institution.

This study will consist of three separate 90-minute interviews. The first set of interviews will focus on your life history. The second set will examine your current experience within the classroom and the third set of interviews will require you to reflect on the meaning you give to your academic experience.

Realizing the demands of your academic schedule, I want to request a meeting with your members in order to inform women about study and recruit potentially interested women. The information gathered during the interviews with students will be digitally recorded, transcribed, and saved on a USB drive and a password protected computer that only I, the primary researcher has access to. Pseudonyms will be utilized to protect your identity within this study.

Possible benefits of this research include: gaining a deeper understanding of your academic experience, becoming aware of the many socio-contextual factors that shape your academic classroom experience and the ability to reflect critically on your experience at a women’s college.

Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and students will be free to discontinue or refuse participation at any time without penalty or prejudice. If you will grant me the opportunity to meet with your members I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this effort. Once again, I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation and gratitude for taking the time to read this request. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Shelly A. Perdomo, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education
Black Women and Latinas, want to share your Academic Experiences?

Volunteer to participate in a study that examines your academic experience in the classroom.

CONTACT:  SHELLY A. PERDOMO, M.Ed.
            Doctoral Candidate,
            Higher Education
            University of Massachusetts Amherst
            Email: Saperdom@educ.umass.edu,
            Phone: 413-210-2909
APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Time of Interview: _______________ Date: _______________

Interviewee: ________________________________________________

Location: __________________________________________________

First set of Interview Questions—Life History of Experience (90 minutes)
1. Tell me about yourself and your upbringing?
2. Tell me about your family structure, how did you interact with them?
3. Describe what your social community was like
4. Growing up, describe what was it like for you in Elementary and high school?
5. What was it like for you in the classroom?
6. Describe how you engaged, participated in classrooms
7. What kind of conversations did you have after school?

Second set of Questions—Contemporary Experience (90 minutes)
1. Currently, what is it like for you in the college classroom?
2. Describe what it is like for you to participate in class discussion?
3. Tell me, what it is like when you did not speak in the classroom?

Third Set of Questions- Reflection on meaning (90 minutes)
1. Reflecting on what you have said thus far, what does your academic experience mean to you?
2. How do you make sense of your collegiate classroom experience?
3. In your opinion, what are there benefits and/or detriments to verbally participating in classroom discussions/ silences? Please explain?

** For each of these sets of interview questions, participants may be asked to elaborate further on information provided during interviewing sessions.
APPENDIX F

RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM: CONSENT FOR VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Title of Study: *Unpacking Voice and Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women and Latinas in American College Classrooms.*

Principal Investigator: Shelly A. Perdomo, M.Ed.

By signing this consent form you, ___________________________________________ indicate that you willingly agree to participate in this research study. The essence of this research is as follows:

**Purpose of Research:**
- To examine the relationship between voice and silence as it relates to the academic experiences of Black women and Latinas within women college classrooms.
- To get a better understanding of how Black women and Latinas make sense of their academic experience within a predominantly white single sexed institution.

**Procedures:**
- The study will consist of *three separate 90-minute interviews.* The first set of interviews will focus on your life history. The second set will examine your current experience within the classroom and the third set will require you to reflect on the meaning you give to your academic experience.
- Interviews will commence in Late January, early February 2008. Each interview will be digitally recorded, transcribed and analyzed by me, the primary researcher.
- Conducting three separate 90-minute interviews, with at least 3 days to 1 week apart is necessary for you to reflect on your experience.
- In case you are not comfortable answering questions orally, I can provide you with written questions which you can complete in private and return to the principal investigator.
- Any questions you may have about the aims or methods of the study will be explained.

**Risks and vulnerability:**
- Although potential risks are minimal, discomfort including emotional feelings, frustration and sadness may occur during the interview process. This however, should not have a detrimental impact to you the participant.
- If any participant experiences some degree of discomfort, anxiety etc., I will suggest that you make an appointment with Counseling Services to reflect on what has caused you discomfort and or anxiety. This will also be one step towards minimizing the possibility of reoccurrence.

**Benefits:**
- Possible benefits from this research include:
  - Gaining a deeper understanding of your academic experiences.
  - Becoming aware of the many socio-cultural factors that shape your academic classroom experience.
The ability to reflect critically on your experience at a single sexed institution.

Contributing to empirical research on Black women and Latinas

**Cost and Compensations:**
- Your participation is voluntary with no monetary compensation forthcoming.

**Confidentiality:**
- Every attempt will be made to ensure strict confidentiality. There will be no identifying names on any transcripts and any report or publications of this study or its results. All data will be stripped of identifying information before anything is reported from the study.
- Pseudonyms will be given to all participants.
- The information gained from this study will be shared with my dissertation chair, committee members.
- There is a possibility that the data generated from this study will be utilized in conference presentations and publications.
- Interviews will be stored on a portable USB drive and a password-protected computer.
- Participation information forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet with a key that I, the primary research shall possess.

**Request for additional Information:**
- Should you have any questions about your participation or any other matter relative to your participation in this project, you may contact me by email at: saperdom@educ.umass.edu or call 413-210-2909 (personal cell phone).

- You can also contact my **Dissertation Chair,**
  - Dr. Benita Barnes,
    - Email: barnesbj@educ.umass.edu Office: (413) 545-1083
    - Department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration, Higher Education
    - 111 Infirmary Way, 255 Hills South
    - University of Massachusetts
    - Amherst, Ma. 01003

- If you would like to speak with someone not directly involved in the research study, you may contact the University of Massachusetts, School of Education, Institutional Review Board Chair Dr. Sharon Rallis at sharonr@educ.umass.edu

**Voluntary Participation:**
- You are under no obligation to participate in this research study. Your participation with this study is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue or refuse participation at any time without penalty and prejudice.
Subject Statement of Voluntary Consent:
- When signing this form, I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I understand that, by signing this document, I do not waive any of my legal rights. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. A copy of this signed Consent form has been given to me to be retained for my records.

Subject/Parent Guardian’s Name (Print or Type)

____________________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                                                 Date

If required: Witness (Print or type) to ☐ Discussion ☐ Signature

____________________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                                                 Date

Study Representative Statement:
- I have explained the purpose of the research, the study procedures, the possible risks and discomforts, the possible benefits and have answered any questions to the best of my ability.

Study Representative Name (Print or Type)  __________________________

____________________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                                                 Date
I would like to take this opportunity and thank you for choosing to volunteer and take part in this research. Once again the purpose of this study is to begin to understand the academic experiences of Black Women and Latinas in women’s college.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I would like to gather some information that will facilitate communication between you (the participant) and I (the researcher). Please note that this information is for my use. Anonymity and Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process.

Name: ________________________________

Address: ______________________________________

Phone: ___________________________ Age: _________

Email: _______________________________ Class: _________

Class year: ________________ Major/s: _______________________

Gender: ________________ Ethno-Racial classification: ________________________

State and/or Country of birth: ____________________________________________

State and/or Country where you currently reside: ______________________________

Family currently resides in an urban, rural or suburban area? ________________

Please write your class schedule for the Spring 2008 Academic Semester?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Thank You
REFERENCES


311


