Undergraduate Experience of a Black Haitian-American Female at a Competitive Predominantly White Institution

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Abstract: Research exploring the experiences of Black female students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) asserts that in such environments they face numerous challenges to academic success. The data also emphasize the importance of understanding how race and gender influence their undergraduate experiences. As a higher education professional of more than 20 years, the author shares her own journey as a traditional age Black, female, urban student of Haitian descent, who attended a competitive PWI over 25 years ago. This autoethnography applies a theoretical framework of "multiple dimensions of identity" in relating various aspects of the author's college experience. The author makes a unique contribution to the literature on Black female undergraduate students at PWIs by offering a candid, transparent, and personal narrative of her academic and campus lived-experience as a graduate of Williams College, as well as some challenges she encountered and the support systems which helped her to persist.

Keywords: Black Female Undergraduate, Predominantly White Institution, Campus Life, Challenges, Persistence

1. Introduction

Robertson and Dundes (2017) and other researchers have suggested that Black female students are confronted with various challenges and adjustment issues, which adversely impact their academic success at predominantly White institutions (PWI). Historically, before the 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools nationwide, Black students overwhelmingly attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) (Benton, 2001); but "by 1973, three-fourths of Black students attended PWIs" (Benton, 2001). Jones and Williams (2006) shared that the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (1994) reported that the attendance of Blacks attending PWIs increased to 79%; and according to the *Digest of Education Statistics* (2000) that number accounted for approximately one million Black students by the late twentieth century. However, their rate of completion at PWIs was disproportional to that of their White counterparts (Allen, 1992).

1.1 The Experiences of Black Students Attending PWIs

Benton (2001) argued that understanding the backgrounds of Black students is essential to providing some context to their experiences in higher education including issues of inequity. Benton states "In general Black students seem academically, culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education" (Hunt et al.,1994, as cited in Benton, 2001, p. 21). Further, Benton conveyed that "In comparison to White students, African-American students have parents that generally live in urban areas, acquire fewer educational degrees, labor in lower status jobs, make less money, and divorce more often" (Allen, 1992; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988, as cited in Benton, 2001, p. 23). Additionally, Kimbrough et al. (1996) asserted that Black American college students enrolled at PWIs experience distinctive adjustment challenges relative to other college students. They were also inclined to create or draw their social values from family or group dynamics. Hence, while Blacks at PWIs were being charged with self-segregating, it could in fact be a coping mechanism for them (Stewart et al., 1997).

Jones and Williams (2006) relayed that higher education campuses were structured to meet the needs of predominantly White students and that "Black students were thus expected to adjust to the environment even when they did not feel affirmed by its culture" (p. 25). They posited that academe must take notice of the cultural distinctions of Black students in order to effectively meet their needs. Wright (1987) stressed the importance of multicultural programs on campus in creating a more welcoming environment, noting that a campus environment which failed to value the unique cultures of its minority student population could be detrimental to their academic and personal growth and could negatively impact their ability to persist to degree completion. To that end, it was paramount that multicultural programs be included in the campus experience at PWIs.

Furthermore, Stewart et al. (1997) noted that on PWI campuses Black American students used various coping mechanisms including choosing to stay together in socializing and even in their rooming choices. They stated, "African-American cultural housing, Black student unions, traditionally Black fraternities and sororities can offer the African-American student on a predominately White campus much needed support and social interaction with students who have common experiences, interests and goals" (p. 4). Stewart et al. shared that while White faculty, students, and staff found such behaviors to be indicative of Black students' desire to isolate themselves from campus at large activities, that this was rarely the case. Allen (1992) relayed that the dearth of Black faculty and staff at PWIs served to compound some of the challenges Black students experienced on those campuses.

Essentially, Black college students must be able to straddle two worlds. Benton (2001) spoke to the "duality of Black students' existence" at PWIs (p. 24). Reflecting on the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Du Bois and Wortham (2011) discussed the state of "double consciousness" for Blacks in America, which W.E.B. Du Bois recognized as early as 1897. Du Bois referenced this "double-nature" as a "life 'within the veil' and the 'two-ness' of soul and thought;" he also noted that "Rather than being polar opposites, the two identities were held in dialectical tension" (p. xvi). Further, he stressed that instead of acquiescing to others' expectations or attempting to erase or wash away their Blackness—skin color, spiritual and cultural identities—Blacks in America "had to be both Americans and African Americans" (p. xvi).

D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) posited that the immense adjustments Black American students must make when choosing to attend PWIs, impacted their personal, family, and social lives, especially given that many lived and attended schools where they were members of the majority population. D'Augelli and Hershberger stated that the adjustment was necessary for Black Americans, especially, when the PWI was located far from their home. Moreover, researchers found that academic preparation prior to college and campus climate were the most significant variables which affected college academic success for Black students.

Further, Brown and Wright's (1999) study found that for Black American students at PWIs, having a support network of faculty, administrators, and fellow students enhanced both their academic persistence and retention. These types of relationships and interactions were important and proved to be crucial to their academic success.

1.2 Black Female Students at PWIs

Throughout history, education has been of significant value in the lives of Black Americans (Hannon et al., 2016). Nationally, higher education institutions have continued to increase their enrollment of Black female students (Robertson & Dundes, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2012), among Black college students, Black women represented two-thirds of baccalaureate degrees. In 2011 the US Department of Education reported a 67% increase in the enrollment of Black women between the years of 1998 and 2008; this also represented a growth of 60% among Black female students seeking bachelor degrees. Additionally, the NCES (2012) reported the rate of undergraduate degree completion among Black women to have even surpassed that of White women.

It is important for researchers to particularly examine the college experiences of Black American women (Henry et al., 2010). Available literature exploring the experiences of Black female students at predominantly White institutions asserts that in those environments they face numerous challenges to academic success (Robertson & Dundes, 2017). Additionally, in discussing barriers to pursuing STEM majors in particular for Black female students at PWIs, Russell and Russell (2015) emphasized that:

> The most salient factors that impacted their decision to change majors included: a) lack of early success in science at the Predominantly White Institution, b) lack of adequate career counseling and advisement, and c) feelings of lack of adequate preparation for science in the college classroom based on their precollege science and mathematics course experiences. Ultimately these factors impacted the Black American women undergraduate students' lack of persistence in their original science degree programs on the college level (p. 101)

The inability to succeed in science courses essentially served to bar access to careers in STEM fields for Black female students.

Lastly, researchers have explored the impact of the "strong Black woman" trope on the experiences of Black female college students (Corbin et al., 2018), which lead them to internalize and exhibit characteristics of independence, self-determination, fortitude, and persistence needed to succeed at PWIs.

Additionally, Corbin et al. noted that the scarcity of Black women at PWIs "exacerbates feelings of entrapment and silencing" (p. 4). Hence, it is imperative that student affairs professionals understand how race and gender influence the development of Black American women as well as their experiences as college students (Hannon et al., 2016).

2. Research Methods

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The model of multiple dimensions of identity is the theoretical framework for my paper. McEwen (2003) posited that along with ethnic, gender, race, and sexual identities college students had additional identities including religious belief, social class, and regional or geographic background. According to Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) the Jones and McEwen (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity offered "one of the first conceptualizations of relationships among social identities" and intersections "between personal identity and social identities" (p. 1). It is one of the theories applicable to the study of college student identity development (McEwen, 2003). Further, Weber (1998) asserted that personal stories shared through literature on women's studies gave rise to the exploration of multiple identities development. Notably, Weber conveyed that these socially constructed identities "Race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously operate in every social situation" (p. 24).

2.2 Approach

Belbase et al. (2008) noted that "In autoethnography, the author of an evocative narrative writes in the first person, making him or her the object of research and thus breaching the conventional separation of researcher and subject (researchee)" (p. 88). Ellis et al. (2011) stated that writers of autoethnography share their past experiences. Additionally, they often reflect back on happenings or events pivotal in the shaping of their lives (e.g., Tillmann, 2009). Upon reflecting on her own work Spry (2001) poetically stated, "Performing autoethnography has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon myself as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate, and embrace" (p. 708). Authors may also engage in interviews including with family members and review various documents and photos for the purpose of remembering (e.g., Herrmann, 2005).

Hence, applying an autoethnographic research methodology was appropriate to effectively narrate my personal undergraduate journey and the various dynamics and mechanisms which impacted my lived-experience as a Black urban female student of Haitian-American background, who attended a competitive predominantly White institution.

2.3 Participant

Through the theoretical application of the multiple dimensions of identity to college student identity development, and using autoethnography methodology, I chronicle my undergraduate journey as a college student of multiple identities. These identities include my: a) race – Black, b) gender – female, c) age – traditional – 17, d) education – second generation college student e) faith – Christian, f) sexuality – heterosexual, g) ethnicity – Haitian-American, h) geographic background – urban – Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Brooklyn, NY and i) socio-economic status – lower income.

2.4 Procedure

My research process for this article entailed a detailed review of artifacts directly related to my undergraduate experience at Williams College, informal phone interviews, and Google searches including:

1. My acceptance letter, numerous copies of loan applications, financial award letters, and my official college transcript.
2. A discussion with my older sister, Nelly O. Gedeon, regarding documents related to our late mother's marital status and educational background, especially, to confirm her educational credentials and the chronology of those accomplishments in relation to our lives.
3. Results of informal interviews conducted with my closest college classmate, Diana St. Louis, to verify some of my memories of my Williams College and study abroad experiences.
4. Results of Google searches performed to confirm my recollection of the names and correct spelling of sites I visited throughout my study abroad program in Mexico.
5. Results of Google searches to verify my recollection of events which had national implications in the US and impacted campus life at Williams College.
6. A review of archived records of on-campus events from the Williams College Sawyer Library Special Collections.

Additionally, I assigned aliases to all individuals mentioned in my paper with the exception of Diana St. Louis and Nelly O. Gedeon, from whom permission to use their actual names was granted. I also reached out to the Williams College Chief Communications Officer via email and received written permission to use the name of the College and places affiliated to Williams College in this manuscript.

Throughout this paper I reference the artifacts and other information compiled during my research process, as I detail aspects of my personal background, college academic and study abroad experiences, as well as my campus co-curricular and social life.

3. Analysis Result

3.1 My Personal Background

In my household, attaining a college degree was expected to be a natural progression of my scholarly pursuits immediately to follow high school graduation. My late mother Adele Lachaud, who had been an avid learner, was clear in articulating this expectation and had set the bar. While her own educational path had been different as a non-traditional student and single parent, she was the first to earn her college degree in my nuclear family with the completion of her bachelor's degree in Social Work before I attended college (N. O. Gedeon, personal communication, April 17, 2021); my sister Nelly, who is almost eight years my senior, went on to receive a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering. Years later, my mother again returned to school to pursue her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (N. O. Gedeon, personal communication, April 17, 2021) as I entered my freshman year of college. We all had been overachievers throughout our primary and secondary schoolings. Yet, as a high school senior, I distinctly remember reporting my mother's annual salary on my FAFSA…a measly $24, 000. For each of us, through our respective and personal journeys, obtaining a college degree had been a means of gaining financial and social upward mobility and stability.

While I was born in Nyack, New York, I had spent much of my early formative years in Port-au-Prince, Haiti from the age of nine months until I was almost nine years old, as Nelly confirmed. At the time, she and I lived in a boarding home and attended separate private schools. Our mother and father divorced months before my birth (N. O. Gedeon, personal communication, April 19, 2021) and I never spoke or had a relationship with him. When my sister and I ultimately came to reside in the United States with our mother, I entered the 4th grade as a bilingual French and Haitian Creole speaker who did not speak English. Over the years, I became fluent in English as well and subsequently excelled academically much as I had while living in Haiti. From 4th to 12th grade I became the product of predominantly White educational institutions, always traveling at least an hour by bus or train to school, while residing in a majority Black community.

3.2 Recounting My College Experience

3.2.1 Why Williams College?

When I began applying for college, my greatest expectation was to attend one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). However, my freshman year algebra teacher Mrs. Weiner at LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts—now also the college advisor during my senior year—urged me to apply to Williams College stating, "You're Black, you're smart, you have the grades, they have the money." Having never heard of Williams College prior, and absent of any visit to its vast, picturesque campus, upon my acceptance to Williams I embarked on a journey to pursue my undergraduate studies with the Ephs, our college mascot and the abbreviation for Colonel Ephraim Williams, my alma mater's namesake.

Deciding since 8th grade that I would be going away for college, I was overjoyed by the possibilities the opportunity to attend Williams offered. However, more freedom and independence from my mom, with whom my relationship had become increasingly more strained and contentious, was what I craved most. Hence, I embraced the immense potential that this fortuitous experience presented—to be the first in my family to go away for college as well as attend an elite institution—with excitement, newfound hope, and fearlessness. Expecting to develop lasting friendships and excel academically as I had throughout my young life, I never once doubted that I would depart from Williams' grounds, degree in hand as planned, in no more than four years.

3.2.2 My Arrival at Williams

On August 29, 1991, as a 17-year-old traditional student, I boarded a Bonanza bus at Port Authority in New York City—headed to Williamstown, Massachusetts with a suitcase and backpack—to attend the W.O.W./ALANA (Window On Williams/African, Latino, Asian, and Native American) Orientation Program '95 at Williams College, which I believe immediately preceded the first day of classes. I clearly recall the sight of cows on enormous open fields and the pungent stench of manure which permeated my nostrils during the latter half of my five-hour trip to Williams. Now a true Brooklynite, since migrating from Port-au-Prince, Haiti eight-years prior, the sight of so many cows admittedly seemed rather strange; yet I remained unalarmed. At around 6pm, about three hours after my initial arrival to campus, I was on Spring Street and asked a stranger for the location of the nearest subway station.

Although I can no longer quite remember his or her exact response, I distinctly recall anxiously searching my backpack for change. Having grabbed every bit of it I could find, I fed it to the nearest pay phone and began crying profusely to my mom while snapping accusingly, "There are no subways here!" I was in such distress and, despite her best efforts, remained inconsolable as I repeated those words to her over and over and over again. I simply could not grasp or fathom how these people lived here without the bare essentials and means that the New York City subways provided. Yes…I experienced a complete culture shock, and it was at that moment that I began to feel fear. That day I feared feeling trapped at Williams, a place where I might not belong. What if I did not fit in?

My attendance at the W.O.W./ALANA Orientation Program was pivotal in reducing these trepidations. That evening I met other first year students from New York City, Boston, and other urban settings and began to feel and believe that I was not alone. I also met many upper class men and women who seemed well-adjusted. They were clearly surviving being in this remote, and majority White environment. I thought to myself, "Some of them have been surviving here for years, surely, I too could make it." While I continued to find the lack of easy access to New York City or to Boston, the nearest city to Williamstown, MA challenging, I was immensely grateful for the effort Williams College had made to connect me to other students of similar ethnicity and backgrounds at the inception of my academic tenure there. To date, I continue to maintain close friendships with a few of the women I met during that introductory weekend.

Additionally, my sister and brother-in-law drove from New York to visit the following weekend. Although I had already began settling into campus life, I was so thankful they came. The next time I saw them again on campus was four years later at my graduation. It was also my mom's only visit to Williams College.

3.3 Surviving Academic Life

Academically, Williams was far more challenging than I expected. While my grades were sufficient enough to later afford me admission to graduate school at Harvard, I firmly believed my secondary education had insufficiently prepared me to handle the challenges and rigors of Williams College level work. At Williams, I explored four different major options: Math my freshman year and Economics and Psychology my sophomore year, before finally settling with Political Science during my second semester of sophomore year.

While I absolutely loved Math in high school, college math courses were much more difficult. And after working so hard only to earn a disappointing B+ and B- for my first two math courses, I increasingly questioned whether I'd ever achieve better grades. I began high school as a strong math student. I took Pre-Calculus the summer prior to my senior year in order to enroll in AP Calculus during my senior year. However, as a Music and Art and Performing Arts vocal major I needed to take Music History in order to graduate, which was offered during AP Calculus and, subsequently, could not take AP Calculus. I have always believed that the one-year lapse from advanced high school Math during my senior year was the main factor which thwarted my efforts to be a math major at Williams. I needed that last year of advanced Math to provide me with a stronger foundation to pursue this subject as a major. I took both my math courses at Williams College with Dr. Mitchell, an excellent Math professor who was very passionate about teaching Math. He was able to explain how certain math equations and concepts were relevant to everyday practical usage in a way that I had never experienced with other Math teachers during my K-12 education.

I met with him numerous times during office hours for clarification of math concepts and, looking back, I wish I had spoken to him about my desire to pursue Math as a major before making a unilateral decision to exclude it from further consideration. I also remember that my mom, who was aware of my decision, did not approve of it. Nevertheless, I walked away from Math.

As a first semester sophomore, I also struggled academically in my economics and psychology courses. I continued to underperform in those subjects, regardless of the number of hours I dedicated to studying and despite the assistance of tutors. And at some point during that semester, for the first time in my educational career, I received a letter informing me that I was in academic jeopardy. It left me distraught, embarrassed, and so ashamed. Additionally, I felt alone and did not dare share my status with any of my peers or close friends. As far as I knew, my Black female friends at Williams were not struggling academically and I did not want to be the anomaly. Subsequently, I experienced a high level of anxiety, stress, and loneliness. My self-confidence was shaken as I began to question my intelligence, potential, and ability to succeed at Williams College. For the first time in my life I doubted my intellect and this, for me, was unchartered territory. I only conveyed all of my fears and personal disappointments to a Black male student, whom I had now been dating for over a year. Otherwise, I chose to suffer silently, speaking of it neither to my mother, sister, or my peers, while persisting in a life of duality and "double consciousness." I was too afraid to discuss my predicament, somehow fearing or perhaps believing that doing so might confirm that I could not cut it at Williams. In hindsight, I realize I should have at least reached out to a trusted professor, advisor, or dean for assistance and guidance during this crucial and challenging period of my undergraduate studies. It would have helped lessen the intense anxieties and stresses I experienced as well as the pressures I placed on myself during that pivotal time of my academic career. As difficult as it became to get out of bed and attend classes some mornings I kept going, but was frequently absent from my College Work Study employment at the library. I prioritized focusing on improving my grades. Ultimately, I survived my first semester of sophomore year with a higher semester and cumulative grade point average than I expected.

By the end of the second semester of my sophomore year my cumulative grade point average continued to improve. Additionally, after taking my second political science course as a second semester sophomore, I decided to declare my major in Political Science with a concentration in International Relations. Political Science was ultimately the right choice and an ideal fit for me because I really enjoyed most of the curriculum offerings and was fairly confident of my written skills. More importantly, I was satisfied that my grades in those courses were directly proportional to the grades I deserved and they appropriately reflected my level of work and effort. However, looking back on my undergraduate studies and having reviewed my transcript numerous times during the course of writing this essay, I deeply regret my decision to discontinue my journey as a Math major. I gave up too quickly on Math when I failed to earn As for my first two courses. To date, I still love Math and believe I would have had an exceptional career as a math teacher, professor, or in another math related profession.

Essentially, my most favorite courses were in the political science, African-American history, women's history, psychology, and anthropology disciplines. I also enjoyed the winter session courses, where we delved into unique topics of our own choosing by traveling abroad, nationally or locally, by choosing a course from the College's course offerings on a topic such as the impact of the media on gender identity.

One such course which I took was Stereotypes in the Media. These issues were frequently new to me, as well as exciting and intriguing to explore. Frankly, the only courses I absolutely hated were my economics courses; I especially abhorred Price Allocation Theory, my second and last attempt with any economics courses, and the only college course from which I withdrew for fear of failing. While I did grasp the concept of supply and demand, beyond that, I simply struggled too much to understand the many other theories and definitions associated with that particular subject.

Nonetheless, I am tremendously grateful to all of my professors who, regardless of subject area, were very supportive, caring, and approachable. They were always willing to meet during office hours and by appointment if the posted hours presented a conflict. I liberally took advantage of office hours when I had questions about course assignments or challenges with coursework. Some of my classmates and I also had the opportunity to engage in class discussions with a few of my professors at their homes. All of my professors were, to me, effective in their roles as faculty in that they provided a syllabus which served as our contract for the duration of the course, and clearly abided by those contracts. Like many of my peers at Williams College, I arrived as an independent learner; I expected no more from faculty and they did not serve as advisors to me with respect to any of my academic, professional, or personal plans. Throughout my high school years my mom certainly attended every Parent-Teacher Conference. However, since the age of 13, I had been meeting with department heads on my own to advocate for myself in requesting consideration for certain courses, including honors and AP, without her involvement or assistance and had successfully navigated the system. Frankly, at the tender age of 17, I never viewed my interaction with faculty at Williams College as a potential opportunity for mentorship. At the time, I simply knew nothing about mentorship, let alone its value. In fact, I did not begin to understand its benefits until my late 20s as a higher education professional.

However, while writing this essay I came to realize that one of the deans in the Office of Academic Affairs did serve as a mentor to me. We first met during my sophomore year, as I planned my study aboard trip to Mexico for my junior year. I became very dependent on her support as a junior, following a very difficult break up with my boyfriend of two years, who had since graduated from Williams College. Dean Hellen Ferell-Thorpe dissuaded me from withdrawing from school. For months she communicated with me daily to find out how I was doing, to encourage me to attend classes, and continued to touch base with me throughout my remaining semesters at Williams. She believed in my academic potential. Her support and guidance were instrumental in ensuring my academic persistence and that I remained on course for graduation. Years later, Dean Hellen Ferell-Thorpe also wrote one of my recommendations for my application to Harvard Divinity School. In fact, she had been both a mentor and sponsor to me and had had a positive and indelible impact on my college life and academic success. Over the span of my higher education professional life—I have come to fully embrace the value and benefits of mentorship. I currently serve as a mentor to a few of my colleagues and many of my students in supporting their educational and professional goals and aspirations, while continuing to benefit from the mentorship and sponsorship of others.

With respect to academic advisement, my only recollection of it was meeting with a faculty member during my first semester, who gave me a sheet with two pre-selected courses and directed me to select two others from a list of introductory courses. After that semester, I selected my courses on my own for the remainder

of my academic career. Again, I had been an independent learner throughout high school and had sought specific courses without the input of my family or teachers. I naturally expected college to be an opportunity to further expand on my freedom and ability to explore and select courses of interest to me. I was quite satisfied with the minimal level of academic advisement I received.

3.4 Financial Challenges

My financial challenges were also something I did not discuss much with my peers. Having an outstanding Bursar bill was the norm for me at Williams. My family income did not change much during my four years in college. And while financial aid remained generous and included College Work Study, I could not pay the negligible amount required for my tuition and room and board. Despite the numerous letters I received informing me that my account was delinquent, thankfully, I was allowed to return to Williams every semester and grew accustomed to my yearly visits with Mrs. Smart in the Bursar's Office. I pursued additional loans when possible and did not discuss it in depth with my peers, except the young man I was dating at the time and perhaps my closest college friend Diana, also of Haitian descent, who I met during my very first day on campus. Ultimately, I paid my outstanding balance in full a few years after graduating.

3.5 Engaging in Cocurricular and Extracurricular Activities

Concerning my co-curricular and extracurricular activities, like me, my closest friends at Williams were Black as they had also been throughout my K-12 education, with the exception of one or two individuals, with whom the friendship did not withstand post-graduation. My friends and I often frequented the Multicultural Center and the Black Student Union (BSU), also known as Rice House. We also attended presentations by various guest lecturers and performances by professional artists and, on rare occasions, the Black Student Union organized trips to attend performances in New York City. I still remember when a well-known rap group, during a performance on our campus, had the unmitigated gall to give a shout out to "Connecticut College." I had a conversation about the rap concert with Diana. She nor I could definitively remember the name of the rap group (D. St. Louis, personal communication, April 17, 2021). But we both laughed as I recounted the rapper's egregious blunder. During my freshman year, many of my friends and I also participated in a student organized, campus wide peaceful protest over the acquittal of the Los Angeles Police Department officers who engaged in the brutal beating of Rodney King.

With respect to the social scene at Williams College, I did not care much for the parties because if you had been to one, you had been to them all. At the time, Williams had a student population of about 2000, and a Black student population of 8%. No matter the music, with kegs of beers or without, seeing the same faces over and over got old relatively quickly. A large part of my leisure time was spent playing spades, a card game, or participating in spades tournaments and game nights. My friends and I, as well as other Black students, gathered at the Black Student Union weekly to watch A Different World, a sitcom which depicted life for Black students at a HBCU. While many of my White counterparts watched Seinfeld, a sitcom about the interactions and daily lives of four single White friends. Lastly, I was also the Williams College Gospel Choir co-conductor during my sophomore year and the sole conductor my senior year. Having given my life to Christ a few weeks prior to coming to College, I embraced the choir as a welcomed outlet for drawing closer to my faith. We were a majority Black group of about 30 to 35 people. Conducting the choir required a tremendous time commitment from me. I allocated at minimum eight hours a week to

the choir between full choir rehearsals, sectional rehearsals, music selection and preparation, and communication with the Gospel Choir officers. We performed one concert per semester at Williams and occasionally performed on and off campus by invitation. Ultimately, my leadership over the choir strengthened my work ethic, leadership, organizational, and time management skills, as it necessitated juggling my commitment to the choir, my academic work, my social life, and College Work Study.

Overall, my co-curricular and extracurricular activities kept me from going stir crazy and from missing New York City too much. I also loved the fact that I had my own room, meaning no roommate, all four years at Williams. This gave me a certain level of freedom and independence that I did not have back home in Brooklyn. However, having been the product of predominantly Black neighborhoods all my life, there were times that I really struggled with the scarcity of Black faces on campus. I had grown accustomed to being a minority, as the only Black person or one of two or three Black people in most of my junior high school classes and all throughout my high school honors and AP courses. After school, however, I always returned to my majority Black neighborhood. For the first time in my educational career, at Williams I would be a minority during and after class for the next four years of my academic life and…to put it in a colloquial term embraced by or certainly familiar to many among the Generation XYZ-ers, "The struggle was real." This, eventually, prompted me to pursue a study abroad program with Diana, during our junior year, through an international study abroad program in Jamaica or Mexico. I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to continue my studies at a non-PWI environment for a semester. With no available seats in the program in Jamaica, Diana and I pursued our study abroad in Mexico for the first semester and she attended Spelman College, a HBCU, her second semester of junior year. I also doubled my efforts to ensure that I would graduate in no more than four years as planned.

3.6 Recollections of My Study Abroad Experience

My semester abroad in Mexico was quite memorable and an integral component of my college experience. The program consisted of a group of thirteen students, twelve females and one male, as well as the director of the program who was also male. Diana and I were the only Black students in the group. In addition to the group activities, she and I socialized outside of the group, engaging each other in both Haitian Creole and English as we had at Williams.

Some of us had a few negative experiences during our stay in Mexico. One negative incident occurred while we were in Mexico City. The fourteen of us rode the subway one afternoon. Before we could exit the train, many of the female students and I were grabbed, groped, yanked in all of our private parts and, consequently, were left shocked, shaken and in tears (D. St. Louis, April 17, 2021). Needless to say, it was our last subway ride in Mexico City.

Additionally, as a "Morena" student in Oaxaca, I was a novelty to some of its inhabitants and drew certain unwanted attention; While some would stop and stare at me, a few took the liberty of touching my hair—which I kept natural without extensions, a permanent or relaxer—without asking. Lastly, while staying with a host family in Morelia, Mexico, the mother asked me if Black people were all thieves in the US the way they were portrayed on television. I was taken aback by her question and told her no and that this was merely how we were being depicted on television. I did not belabor my point. However, the remainder of my stay in her home became a bit uncomfortable for me. I cannot speak to whether or not she too began

to feel uneasy following our dialogue. As I had done with uncomfortable comments which were made in class during Honors Global Studies around the discussion of slavery in the U.S., I stated my point and outwardly appeared to move on, even if I mentally remained perplexed or upset.

Nonetheless, the positives of my study abroad program overwhelmingly outweighed the negatives, and I made a conscious decision not to allow those occurrences to overshadow my overall study abroad experience. My semester abroad was an amazing and unique learning opportunity which afforded me the chance to be fully immersed in a new culture. As a group we traveled throughout Mexico visiting numerous museums; we learned about the works of the famous Mexican painter Frida Kahlo; we visited Aztec and Mayan ruins while exploring the political, historical, and cultural traditions of the country as well as its mestizo and indigenous populations. We each engaged in an independent study and submitted a research paper written in Spanish. We also enjoyed sampling the various cuisines native to the Mexican culture. Diana and I, as well as a few other students, also took advantage of the opportunity to visit Agua Azul, a sight of beautiful waterfalls which required taking some remote roads before we finally arrived. The long journey was well worth it! Additionally, each student had the opportunity to live with three host families: one in Oaxaca, one in the countryside, and one in Morelia. Our travels also included numerous short stays at various hotels throughout the country. While I struggled a bit with speaking, reading and writing Spanish when I first arrived, I left Mexico three and a half months later fluent; regrettably, I was unable to retain it over the years. Finally, during our very last stop before flying back to our respective homes in the United States, we all stayed at an unforgettable breathtaking beach called Puerto Escondido in Oaxaca, a tourist destination I plan to visit again someday.

3.7 Importance of Connecting and Building Relationships with Students

Outside of the classroom, throughout my freshman through junior years, my interactions with non-Black students were limited to members of the Gospel Choir and those who frequented the BSU and Multicultural Center. Albeit my suitemate during freshman year had been White, and although we got along well, we never formulated a friendship. I specifically remember being constantly aware that she was much more financially well off than I was, as everything in our common room from the bean bags, to the computer, to the printer, etc. all belonged to her.

However, during my senior year, I discovered the Christian Fellowship group on campus, which was majority White, and began to occasionally worship and fellowship with them. This experience, through my faith, led me to be more open to socially interacting with students of other ethnic backgrounds and with White students in particular. During my senior year, Diana and I also became scorekeepers for the Men's Basketball Team (D. St. Louis, March 12, 2021) and began traveling with the team, also primarily White. This too broadened my comfort level in interacting with White students outside of the classroom. Lastly, upon graduating, I went on to live in North Adams while interning at the Williams College Admissions Office and increasingly interacted more frequently and comfortably with people of diverse backgrounds. All of these experiences led to a greater willingness and openness to forging friendships with people of all ethnic persuasions; after returning to New York City through my membership at the Church of the Advent Hope, a vastly diverse setting, for the first time I came to establish meaningful relationships with both Blacks and non-Blacks. Some of these relationships now span over 20 years.

Overall, I had a very positive undergraduate experience at Williams. And as an Eph of the class of 1995, I will always be grateful for my Williams education and cherish the long-lasting friendships I made.

3.8 Discussion and Conclusion

3.8.1 Experiences of Black STEM Students

Russell and Russell (2015) cite the work of (Green) 2008 and Seymour and Hewitt (1997) in asserting that "research studies on Black Americans in STEM clearly delineates the marginalization talented Black American students encounter at Predominantly White Institutions and the 'weeding out' ideology which is often the unfortunate message conveyed to racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 102). I maintain that my choice to drop Math as a major had much more to do with the fact that I had not taken AP Calculus in high school and, subsequently, came to college underprepared to pursue that discipline as a major. However, the "weeding out" process of Bio pre-med majors is something I had heard of at Williams. Specifically, organic chemistry was considered the "weeding out" course and I knew a few Black students who switched to another major the semester after taking it. Nevertheless, I always received it to mean it was a weeding out of all students, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, who performed poorly in organic chemistry. It stands to reason that students from urban public schools who may not have benefitted from advance science and math courses would be the more likely recipients of the "weeding out," rather than those who had attended prestigious college preparatory schools prior to coming to Williams College.

3.8.2 Pressure to Succeed

The pressure I imposed on myself to succeed at Williams as a Black female student was overwhelming because of the academic rigor which accompanied admission to such a competitive and prestigious institution. I had been academically successful throughout my formative education in Haiti as well as my elementary through high school years in the United States. For the first time in my academic career, the challenges of Williams academic work presented the potential of falling short of my academic goals and expectations. The fear of failing was tremendous and overwhelming. Yet, I forced myself to work through those feelings and emotions often alone, and without the support of my fellow peers or friends. Looking back, I suspect there were other Black students who felt the same way and who, like me, chose to suffer silently. I simply did not want to give my peers, friends, or professors cause to question whether I could succeed at a competitive PWI or belonged at the elite and illustrious "Williams College."

3.8.3 Diversity and Multiculturalism at Williams

Williams was ahead of its time in seeking to meet the needs of its multicultural student population. The institution had the means and resources to commit to promoting an environment that acknowledged and celebrated the multicultural backgrounds of its students of color and student body at large. Williams housed a Multicultural Center which promoted multicultural activities on and off campus. Additionally, Kusika Dance performances, various student club cultural events, rap concerts, the Gospel Choir, and numerous lectures by guest speakers were all some of the activities of which I availed myself. My peers and I also attended student planned cultural events in New York City. Further, Rice House, the Black Student Union on campus, not only sponsored its share of cultural events, but also was an opportunity to congregate with people of similar social and cultural experiences. That kind of familiarity was comforting

and made a tremendous difference in my undergraduate experience. I benefited greatly from such foundations that were not afforded to all my predecessors and which positively contributed to my persistence and completion at Williams College. And I strongly believe that Black students attending PWIs, which do not have the financial resources and wherewithal to provide a multicultural environment representative and inclusive of their cultural needs, struggle even more to adjust and persist at those institutions. Nonetheless, I fully acknowledge that the Black experience at Williams is neither homogeneous nor monolithic. Hence, my experience does not represent that of Black students as a whole at Williams College, as I am aware of a few Black female alumni whose experiences were not all positive at Williams.

It is also noteworthy to reiterate that despite these many advantages, and although my education had been obtained at predominantly White settings throughout my educational career in the US, I still experienced feelings of isolation as a Black female student. This was because I had lived in and been the product of predominantly Black communities all my life in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and in Brooklyn, New York; and attending Williams College necessitated living in a predominantly White setting.

I also felt that I lived in two worlds or cultures throughout my academic life in the United States. This spoke to the "double consciousness" or duality expounded on by W.E.B. Du Bois. During my elementary through high school educational experience, I was often in the gifted class or honors class in elementary and junior high school, and AP courses in high school—where I tended to be the only Black person or one of two or three in many of those classes, as previously mentioned. And so I was accustomed to behaving in the manner I believed was expected of me in the classroom. I knew what to say, what not to say, and when to remain silent even if I disagreed. However, outside of class, my friends were always Black; they were the ones with whom I socialized in and out of school and were privy to the more uncensored version of myself. Living this duality prior to college helped to adequately prepare me to be in a Williams College classroom setting for four years. I believe persisting at Williams, as a PWI institution, would have been more challenging for me without that exposure. Therefore, while always resided in predominantly Black settings, attending predominantly White educational settings became crucial to my adjustment and acclimation to Williams College academic life. And although I felt more comfortable expressing myself openly in class at Williams, than I had at other predominantly White educational settings, living in a majority White environment remained a challenge for me throughout my undergraduate studies.

3.8.4 My Final Thoughts

I value and treasure my Williams College experience. Therefore, when I began to take my daughter on college tours, Williams was at the top of my list and the very first school we visited as I beamed with pride and filled with memories. It was wonderful to walk through Baxter Hall, where she and I ate breakfast, and to point out the Freshmen Quad where I lived in Sage B. Although, I was not sure that Williams College would be the right fit, I wanted her to at least consider my alma mater. We then visited another campus, which fancies itself a rival of Williams and…Of course I have not forgotten our contentious basketball games at home or away…I am an EPH!

Lastly, the process of writing this article was incredibly nostalgic. I was both surprised and excited to have found my acceptance letter and a few financial aid award notices and my W.O.W. T-shirt from Williams.

I hope reading my personal journey as a Black female college student at Williams College, a competitive PWI, helps to elucidate the potential for learning and personal growth that such a setting can offer. I hope it reveals some of the financial and emotional challenges that a Black student can experience as a normal process or phase of his or her academic and social growth and development in college and which may be heightened at a competitive PWI. May it serve as a resource for guidance to higher education practitioners, policymakers, and particularly student affairs personnel.

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