

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BLACK STUDENTS LEARNING ABOUT
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The value of Black students knowing about their history has been well-established within the scholarly literature on the teaching and learning of African American history. There is a paucity of empirical studies, however, that examine how exposure to this knowledge informs students' historical and contemporary understandings. Framed by the theory of collective memory, the purpose of this study was to investigate how two teachers' contrasting representations of African American history shaped student' understanding of the Black past and its relationship to the experiences of Black Americans today. To examine this, I conducted an ethnographic study at two school sites that each required students to complete a year-long course on African American history. The participants in this study were two groups of Black high school students and their respective African American history teacher. Analysis of data derived from classroom observations, student and teacher interviews and curricular artifacts (e.g., reading materials, handouts, assessments and writing samples) indicate that teachers' representations of African American history shaped students' understandings in distinctive ways. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining students' interpretations of the Black experience in relation to two teachers' competing narratives on the meaning and significance of African American history. Findings from this study suggest that we must go beyond advocating for inclusion of African American history curricula and work toward ensuring this is being taught in a way that is relevant and meaningful for students.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents, Greeley and Letha Richardson.

I hope I made you proud.

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Faith is the assurance...of the things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see.
- Hebrews 11:1

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
CHAPTERS	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the problem.....	1
Theoretical framework.....	4
Purpose statement.....	7
Research questions.....	8
Significance of the study.....	8
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	12
Teaching African American history in schools: A historical trajectory.....	12
Empirical studies.....	19
Teachers’ representations of African American history.....	19
Black students’ interpretations of African American history.....	20
Summary and conclusion.....	22
3. RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY.....	26
Epistemological approach.....	27

Strategy of inquiry.....	28
Research sites.....	28
Participants.....	33
Data collection.....	38
Data analysis.....	47
Validity.....	49
Confidentiality.....	51
Researcher positionality.....	51
4. SIS. SHABAZZ’S REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY.....	55
A portrait of Sis. Shabazz and the classroom environment.....	57
Oppression.....	59
Resistance.....	68
The struggle continues--A call to action.....	76
Conclusion.....	85
5. KUUMBA STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK EXPERIENCE.....	86
Enduring struggle.....	88
Strength and achievements.....	93
The struggle continues.....	100
Solutions unclear.....	112
Conclusion.....	118
6. MR. ABATI’S REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY.....	122
A portrait of Mr. Abati and the classroom environment.....	124

Oppression.....	127
Empowerment.....	136
Victory.....	142
Conclusion.....	147
7. SMITH STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK EXPERIENCE.....	150
Struggle.....	152
Strength and achievements.....	157
Victory.....	167
Cultural deficit.....	171
Conclusion.....	177
8. CONCLUSION.....	180
Summary of findings.....	181
Implications and significance.....	184
Limitations and areas for future research.....	188
Recommendations for educators.....	190
Closing remarks.....	194
REFERENCES.....	196
APPENDICES.....	207
A. Student interview protocol.....	207
B. Teacher interview protocol.....	212

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. School demographics.....	29
2. Student participant profiles.....	35
3. Data collection methods.....	47

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In “The Afrocentric Idea in Education” (1991), African American studies scholar Molefi Asante explicates the value of teaching students U.S. history from an *Afrocentric* perspective, or “frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African persons” (p. 171). As to how this would benefit Black youth in particular, Asante asserts:

“Certainly, if African American children were taught to be fully aware of the struggles of our African forebears they would find a renewed sense of purpose and vision in their own lives. They would cease acting as if they have no past and no future” (p. 177).

Asante’s belief that knowledge of African American history is vital in the education of Black youth is not new. Since the early 20th century, Black scholars and historians have stressed the importance of integrating African American history into the school curriculum, citing that the failure to acknowledge the historical experiences of people of African descent perpetuated the notion of Black inferiority and contributed to Black children having a distorted sense of identity (Bell, 1923; Bruce, 1937; Danna, 2002; Franklin, 2003; Hale, 2011; Rury & Hill, 2013; Woodson, 1926; Wright, 2003). In addition to its potential social benefits--mainly reducing prejudice against Blacks--early advocates maintained that teaching African American history in school would instill Black youth with a sense of racial pride (Bell, 1923; Bruce, 1937), self-

esteem and serve as a source of inspiration (Dreer, 1934; Wright, 1934). Consistent with these views, contemporary scholars have posited that knowledge of African American history can enhance Black students' sense of self (Banks, 1991; Dagbovie, 2005; Gay, 2005; Heard, 1999; Kershaw, 1989; Schugurensky, 2002), help them to better understand their place in the world (Asante, 1991), as well as foster cultural empowerment (Merelman, 1993).

Though much has been theorized about the inherent value of exposing Black youth to their history, less attention has been given to what students interpret from information being presented to them about their history and culture. Overall, empirical studies concerning Black students' understanding of African American history suggests that students construct a range of meanings while learning about their past. For example Bettis, Cooks and Bergin (1994) found that students who participated in a 10-week Civil Rights curriculum came to see the Movement as a struggle involving various marginalized groups as opposed to only Black people and that the fight for civil rights is an on-going struggle. Previous research also suggests that the way African American history is represented, or portrayed, influences students' historical understandings (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008; Woodson, 2015).

The present study expands on the existing scholarship related to the teaching and learning of African American history in three key ways. First, despite claims by scholars and activists about the purpose and value of teaching Black students their history, there appears to be a paucity of empirical research examining how students process this knowledge in practice. Without a deliberate attempt to uncover how students are processing the information being presented to them, we cannot be sure how students are being impacted through their exposure to

this curriculum. My dissertation addressed this limitation by investigating how two groups of students interpreted their respective teacher's depiction of the historical Black experience in the context of an African American history class at different school sites. Second, previous studies have examined how teachers' pedagogical practices (Epstein, 2000; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008) and curricular materials (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Woodson, 2015) influence Black students' interpretations of African American history but have not explicitly focused on how teachers talk about, or frame, this content. Given the authority teachers have in determining what is important to know and the 'correct' way of thinking about this knowledge (Wills, 2015), it is important to examine how teachers frame the meaning and significance of African American history and how this informs students' understandings. My research addressed this gap by investigating students' perceptions of the historical and contemporary Black experience in relation to their teacher's portrayal of African American history.

Analysis of data revealed that the two teachers' representations of the Black past shaped students' understandings in distinct ways. One teacher, Sis. Shabazz, framed African American history as a *continuity narrative*, whereby she emphasized that the notion of struggle was, and continues to be, a defining feature of the Black experience. Similarly, the students I interviewed expressed that there has been little improvement in the lives of Black Americans with regards to racism, justice and equality. Meanwhile the second teacher, Mr. Abati, presented a *triumphant narrative* of African American history in which he conveyed that Blacks have remedied most, if not all, past forms of racism and inequality. The students I interviewed from his classroom expressed a very similar conception of the Black past as Mr. Abati. Moreover in contrast to the

other student participant group, the participants from Mr. Abati's class largely believed that racism was a thing of the past.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by the theory of collective memory. The concept of collective memory originated from the work of Maurice Halbachs (1980) and refers to the ways in which memories of the past are constructed by individuals, groups and societies (Harris, 2006; Hill, 2009). Thus this concept of memory challenges the idea of history being an objective representation of the past. Rather collective memory holds that conceptions of the past are shaped by ideas and concerns in the present (Halbwachs, 1951, p 48; cited in Harris, 2006, p. 20). As a result, certain memories are made salient while others become 'forgotten' or 'silenced,' which shape particular narratives, or ways of thinking about, the past (Wills, 2005)

The selective 'remembering' and 'forgetting' of particular memories in turn contributes to multiple, often competing historical narratives, or ways of remembering the past (Wills, 2005; Hill, 2009, p. 358). In analyzing common misconceptions surrounding Rosa Park's involvement in the Montgomery bus boycott, for example, Kohl (1995) argues that the omission of certain memories has contributed to an overly simplistic, distorted and uncritical narrative of Rosa Parks and the Movement in general. For instance instead of being told about Mrs. Park's involvement with the NAACP, students are often taught that she was just a seamstress. Another oft-cited myth, according to Kohl, is that Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat because she was tired when in actuality, Mrs Parks' actions were deliberate. Conversely, the inclusion of these memories renders an entirely different narrative that emphasizes notions of agency and resilience. In addition to there being multiple ways of remembering historical figures and events,

the meaning of the totality of the historical Black experience is also open to interpretation.

Thomas (2012), for example, delineates four meta-narratives of the Black experience, or ways of talking and thinking about the nature of Blacks' existence in America. These include stories of secular triumph, spiritual pilgrimage, reaction and assimilation, and deficit. Similarly in an earlier publication, Patterson (1970) explicates five conceptions of Black history, which range from *catastrophic* to *contributionist* interpretations of the Black past. In each of these examples, the privileging of certain memories over others contributes to contrasting narratives, or ways of talking and thinking about the past.

Finally, studies focusing on collective memory typically also involve analysis of “memory texts,” (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003), or mediums through which the past is represented in the public sphere. This includes, but is not limited to, monuments, commemorations and museums. In schools--and in particular history and social studies classrooms--‘memory texts’ take the form of primary and secondary documents such as textbooks, documentaries, photos, film and the like. It would be remiss, however, not acknowledge the role teachers have in shaping students’ conceptions of the past (King, 2012; Wills, 2005). While curricular materials do play an important role in sanctioning what counts as “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993), it is educators who give these materials meaning. In this way, teachers serve as instructional “gatekeepers” (Thornton, 2005) by making decisions about what should get taught. Thus in the context of teaching history, teachers may be given a curriculum to follow, but they will not necessarily teach it the same way. For example, one teacher may portray the Reconstruction era as a time of progress while another could frame this

period as a continuation of slavery. In essence, memory texts can be employed to construct multiple narratives.

These different conceptions of the past, in turn, have import for how individuals make sense of the world in which they are situated and their role within it (Brown & Brown, 2012; Hill, 2009; Thomas, 2012). Bruyneel (2012) explores this linkage through analyzing two competing narratives surrounding Dr. Martin Luther King. One conception of King submerges the memory of his involvement in radical politics while the other portrays King “as a confrontational and radical figure” (p. 75). Building on this, Bruyneel maintains that there are important stakes involved in how the past is remembered, citing that the “relationship of a people to its past is critical in defining the political imperatives of the present and the future” (p. 76). In the case of King, Bruyneel posits that the more sanitized version of King’s legacy is deployed to suggest the emergence of a post-racial America whereas the other rejects the notion that King’s dream has been fully realized and is more likely to foster social action. Along this vein, Thomas (2012) asserts that presenting students with a triumphant narrative of the Black experience could potentially lead youth to be unaware of, or indifferent to, challenges plaguing Black communities today.

It is through the lens of collective memory that I sought to examine how teachers’ contrasting representations of African American history shape Black students’ conception of the historical and contemporary Black experience.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine Black students' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience in relation to their teacher's representation of African American history. As instructional "gate-keepers" (Thornton, 2005), teachers have profound influence over what information is presented to students and, conversely, what content is omitted. Thus, two teachers could be given an identical African American history curriculum and still teach it in different ways. Indeed, teachers can *say* different things about identical information. The given curriculum may ask teachers to teach students that the Black Panther Party was a militant group; however, a teacher could tell his/her students something completely different based on the instructor's personal beliefs, prior knowledge and experiences (Fang, 1996). In short, it is important to not just consider a teacher's practices but how he or she frames the content being presented.

Framed by the theory of collective memory, this study sought to understand how two teachers' competing representations of African American history shaped students' understanding of the Black past and its meaning and significance for the present. Thus, each group of students constituted its own community in order to compare the nature of each group's understandings. Contemporary scholars contend that there have been, and continue to be, multiple and often competing narratives about the nature of the Black experience in America (Marable, 2005; Thomas, 2012). If this is the case, and conceptions of the past have import for how individuals understand the present, how do contrasting representations of the historical Black experience

ⁱ African American history and Black history are used interchangeably. In this vein, I also alternate between using 'Black' and 'African American' when referring to individuals who have both African and American ancestry.

inform Black students' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience?

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do the teachers in this study represent the nature of the African American historical experience in their respective African American history courses?
2. What do student participants collectively remember learning about the nature of the historical Black experience?
3. To what extent do students believe the experiences of Black Americans have changed or remained the same based on their conception of African American history?

Significance of the Study

Connecting Black students to their history can serve to affirm students' racial and cultural identity; however there is also the possibility that this exposure can do nothing at all or even have deleterious effects. The very students who arguably stand to benefit most by learning about African American history can wind up feeling worse about themselves, not have gained any new insights about the past and how it informs the present or both. It is also possible that Black students are left in a state of emotional limbo. For instance it is difficult, if not impossible, to teach Black history without discussing issues of race and racism, which may understandably cause some students to feel anger and resentment over past and on-going forms of oppression. While this may be an unavoidable part of the rearticulation process (or helping individuals to express a consciousness that already exists (Collins, 2000, p. 32), learning about the historical experiences of African Americans may cause more harm than good if educators do not help

Black students channel their emotions in a productive manner. Not used productively, students' anger can lead to what Cornel West (2001) refers to as *black nihilism*, or that which “denies the hope in which this anger is founded” (cited in Allan, 2013, p. 357). While it may be easy to articulate what educators hope African American students will gain by learning about their history, the only way to know how students are being impacted is to provide spaces for students to share their understandings. This study privileges student voice in an effort to better ensure that African American history is being taught in meaningful ways. In doing so, my goal is to shift the focus from what is being taught about African American history (if it is at all) to how it is being talked about in the classroom.

This relates to another significance of the study, which is the apparent dearth of empirical research examining what is being taught about Black history in schools and how this shapes Black students' experiences and understandings in the 21st century (Thornhill, 2014). When the movement for Black history first began to crystalize around the early 1920s, the Black experience was marked by the struggle for basic human and civil rights (Dagbovie, 2006, p. 636). Within the context of overt racism, discrimination and devaluing of Black life, African American historians and educators generally believed that Black students should learn about what their ancestors were able to accomplish in spite of their oppression, as doing so would serve as a source of inspiration and pride (Bell, 1923; Bruce, 1937; Woodson, 1923; Wright, 1934). The underlying assumption was that Black youth suffered from an inferiority complex and that the way to remedy this affliction was to teach Black students the “truth” of what their race has contributed to society and civilization.

The present generation of young Black people, however, has had very different life experiences. On one hand, today's Black youth have witnessed the election of the country's first Black president, which led to countless discussions in the public sphere about whether America had officially become "post-racial" (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Thomas, 2012). Moreover, in contrast to the lived experiences of African Americans almost 150 years ago, Blacks today have attained most of their basic civil rights (Dagbovie, 2006) and assumed more positions of power. Explicit racism has also become more socially unacceptable (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). On the other hand, the Black community still faces its fair share of challenges, including high rates of poverty, unemployment and incarceration, and insufficient access to a quality education. Moreover, the police-involved killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown Jr., Tamir Rice, Eric Gardner, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Laquan McDonald, Walter Scott, Natasha McKenna, Rekia Boyd and countless others have reignited conversations about the prevalence of police brutality and sparked questions about the value of Black life. In light of such paradoxes--that race is deemed both inconsequential and as having a very real impact in the everyday experiences of people of African ancestry--it is important to consider what implications this has, or *should* have, on how African American history is framed in classrooms. What should teachers tell students about the historical Black experience? Why? What are the consequences of privileging certain memories, or aspects, of Black history over others in terms of the meaning and significance this knowledge has for students? While findings from qualitative research cannot be generalized, this study may be able to aid schools and practitioners create more meaningful and relevant Black history curricula.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature by illuminating nuances in students' meaning-making and reactions. Black students are not a monolithic group (Thornhill, 2014). Simply exposing Black youth to their history does not mean they will all perceive, value or be impacted by this curricula in the same way. History in general is often a difficult subject for students to connect with and Gay (2004) contends that the field of social studies education "has a long history of not being very popular with or valued by" students in urban schools, whom are primarily Black and Latino. I believe Black history should not be viewed any differently from other sorts of history in this regard. There is no guarantee students will find African American history more engaging than other history classes. Thus, it is important for scholars and practitioners to appreciate the diverse range of experiences and perspectives that exist among Black students in order to effectively address their needs and interests.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

My dissertation research examines Black students' experiences learning about African American history in school. More specifically, I investigated how teachers' competing representations of African American history shaped students' understanding of the contemporary and historical Black experience. The following questions guided my literature review: 1) What key figures helped propel the movement to provide instruction on African American history in school; 2) Why was this considered especially important in the education of Black children?; and 3) What empirical studies have been conducted in relation to how Black students interpret African American historical content in school?

Accordingly, I divided this chapter into two sections. In the first, I provide a historical context for how African American history came to be taught in schools and its perceived relevance for Black students. In the subsequent section I review empirical studies on Black students' conceptions of African American history in the context of history and social studies classrooms. I then conclude with a summary of the literature and discussion of how the present study contributes to the existing scholarship.

Teaching African American History in Schools: A Historical Trajectory

In the 21st century, it is not uncommon to find aspects of African American history taught in American public schools. At a minimum, schools will often participate in the annual commemorations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., where students typically learn about King's use of non-violent tactics during the Civil Rights Movement and the contributions of other Black

heroes such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Rosa Parks (Landa, 2012). Some schools may even go as far as offering courses focused exclusively on African American history and culture (Essoka, 2005). These and other attempts to integrate the historical experiences of African Americans did not occur by happenstance but are deeply rooted in the larger struggle for African American history that dates back to at least the early 20th century. Beginning around the 1920s, numerous African American scholars and historians began publishing scholarship on the importance of teaching African American history in school (Dagbovie, 2006; Spencer, 2011). Such calls emerged in response to the fact that African Americans were too often misrepresented or omitted in the teaching of U.S. history, which scholars believed perpetuated the notion of Black inferiority (Woodson, 1926, 1933). Thus, proponents maintained that teaching students the ‘true’ story of African American’s presence and contributions in America would help to dispel racial prejudice toward African Americans (Bell, 1923)

While countless African American scholars and historians assisted in disseminating ideas about the teaching and learning of African American history in schools educator, historian and activist Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950) is widely regarded for his role in pioneering the early movement for Black history movement (Dagbovie, 2004; King, Brown & Brown, 2010; Pitre & Ray, 2002). Between 1915 and 1926 alone, Woodson helped establish the Association for the Study of Negro Life (1915), published the first major textbook on Black history titled, *The Negro in Our History* (1922) and founded *The Journal of Negro History* (1926). Of all his accomplishments, however, Woodson is perhaps most noted for creating Negro History Week in 1926, which has come to be celebrated as Black or African American History Month. Woodson created Negro History Week to to facilitate the gradual infusion of African American history into

the school curriculum. In making the case for why such a program was necessary, Woodson argued that Blacks knew practically nothing about their history and that without this knowledge Blacks ran the risk of becoming “a negligible factor in the thought of the world” and “in danger of being exterminated” (1926, p. 239). Woodson believed that raising awareness of Blacks’ contributions to civilization and society was necessary to instill Black youth with racial pride and help eliminate prejudice against African Americans. From Woodson’s perspective, if education could indoctrinate youth into believing that one race was more superior than others, education could do the opposite--it could teach children that all races are equal and thereby bringing about a “reign of brotherhood” (p. 240).

In order to understand Woodson’s line of thinking, one must consider his work in the context of the given historical moment. Negro History Week was founded during “the nadir,” or low point in Black life (Aldridge, 2008, p. 36). This refers to the late 1800s and early 1900s when African Americans experienced tremendous obstacles socially, economically, and politically as they strove to overcome the legacy of slavery. Socially, Blacks were considered second-class citizens and subjected to heinous acts of violence that often went unpunished. Aldridge notes that between 1890 and 1918, an average of two to three Blacks were burned, lynched or “murdered in other vicious ways” every week (p. 37). As a result of their inferior social status, Blacks were deemed unfit to participate in the political process and systematically disenfranchised. Given Blacks’ social and political status, it is not surprising that they also struggled economically. It has been well-documented that African Americans were routinely relegated to menial jobs, faced employment discrimination and paid lower wages than their white counterparts. It is against this backdrop--the social, political and economic plight faced by

Blacks--that Woodson and other Black scholars deemed the teaching of African American history necessary to uplift the Black community and improve race relations.

While early scholars believed knowledge of African American history would benefit all students, such teachings were deemed particularly significant for Black children. A prevalent theme in the literature is the notion that years of “miseducation” (Woodson, 1926) led Black children to develop an inferiority complex. Consequently, many suggested that the primary objectives for teaching Black children African American history should be to instill them with racial pride, arouse race consciousness, and serve as a source of inspiration (Bailey, 1935; Bell, 1923; Bruce, 1937; Wright, 1934). In an essay appearing in *The Journal of Negro History*, Bailey (1935) outlined additional goals teachers may pursue. Among them include focusing on “the virtues of the Negro” under harsh circumstances, stimulating nationalistic desires and having students memorize important people and events (p. 24-26). Bailey concludes, however, that there should only be one goal for teaching African American history:

Regardless as to the merits or demerits of the aims mentioned thus far, it is my opinion, along with others, that the teacher of Negro History should take as his aim the dissemination of the truth. He should examine the past carefully with the idea of opening the minds of the class to the possibilities of the future. The study of the past should reveal the achievements as well as the shortcomings of the Negro. He should then use his mistakes as stepping stones, and his achievements as inspiration” (p. 26).

The notion of truth-telling is prevalent among early scholarship on the teaching of African American history; yet scholars expressed different ideas as to how to achieve these goals. For instance, some believed it was important to highlight what Blacks were able to achieve in the face of insurmountable obstacles (Bell, 1923; Bruce, 1937; Woodson, 1926; Wright, 1934).

Wright (1934), however, claimed it would be insufficient to only teach Black youth about the

origins, background and accomplishments of their race, for it had little relevance to their lived experiences: “The American Negro boys and girls are not going to live in Liberia or Haiti or some other wholly Negro republic or kingdom” (p. 36). Instead, Wright proposed that it was equally important, if not more so, to teach Black children how to live in America as an oppressed group. In other words, he believed African American history should not just provide Black students with historical information but be taught in a meaningful and relevant way. The ‘truth’ then, could mean different things depending on how one conceptualized the aims of teaching Black history.

Interest in the teaching of African American history in schools reached a second peak during the Black Power era as Black students began demand that schools provide more culturally inclusive curricula (Dagbovie, 2006). Although historians have well-documented the influence Black college students had in these efforts, Black high school students also played a prominent role in the integration of African American history integrated in the school curriculum (Danns, 2002; Franklin, 2003; Rury & Hill, 2013; Wright, 2003). According to Rury and Hill, the fight for Black history was a symbol of students’ quest “to gain greater respect for their communities and their culture” who have historically been ignored in the traditional school curriculum (p. 492). One such protest occurred in York, Pennsylvania on April 5, 1968. In “Black Pride Day: 1968,” Wright (2003) describes how African American students at York High School barricaded themselves in the auditorium following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Instead of attending class, students spent the day celebrating the life of Dr. King and creating a list of demands to ensure a balanced curriculum. This included making Black history mandatory for all students and implementing a holiday commemorating the death of Dr. King. The school board

ultimately agreed to create a Negro history course as well as infuse the contributions of African Americans in all subject areas for every grade. Similar protests took place in other cities, which resulted in many schools scrambling to adopt policies mandating the infusion of African American history in the curriculum.

Consistent with the views expressed by early proponents of teaching African American history in school, contemporary scholars continue to purport that exposure to this knowledge would benefit Black students in a range of ways. Some, for example, believe it promises to enhance Black students' sense of self (Banks, 1991; Dagbovie, 2005; Gay, 2005; Heard, 1999; Kershaw, 1989; Schugurensky, 2002) and help students to better understand their place in the world (Asante, 1991). Merelman (1993) has also suggested that Black history has the potential to serve as a source of cultural empowerment. A common theme in this literature, then, is the notion that African American history is a vital component in the education of Black youth.

The actual teaching African American history, however, is not without its challenges. Scholars cite numerous pitfalls in how the historical experiences of Black Americans has been and continues to be (mis)represented in school. In reflecting on the current status of African American history in American schools, for example, King (2017) argues that Black history knowledge is often “additive and superficial” (p. 17). A manifestation of this is when educators emphasize the achievements of individuals, which not only contributes to heroizing of historical figures but presets their accomplishments in isolation from the social context (Hawkman & Castro, 2017; Kincheloe, 1993, cited in Anderson 2013, p. 112; King & Brown, 2014; Smith, 2017). Yet another issue is the selective inclusion and omission of memories from the past that

lead to distorted, fragmented or inaccurate representations of the historical Black experience (Aldridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; Hawkman & Castro, 2017; King, 2016).

Taken together, the aforementioned issues lend itself to the production and perpetuation of overly simplistic narratives of what has and continues to happen to Black people in America (Aldridge, 2006; Hawkman & Castro, 2017; King, 2016; Smith, 2017; Thomas, 2012). Patterson captures this notion in “Rethinking Black History” (1971) in which he explicated five prevailing conceptions of Black history at the time. This includes radical and conservative catastrophism, radical and conservative survivalism, and contributionism. Patterson found the latter to be the most common interpretation of the Black past and refers to it as an emphasis on Blacks’ contributions to civilization both in Africa and America, which engender a sense of pride. In this way, Patterson’s definition of contributionism is very similar to when educators focus almost exclusively on the historical achievements of African Americans.

The five “stages of multicultural curriculum transformation” synthesized from the works of James Banks (1993) and Peggy McIntosh (2000) provides a useful framework for the present study in analyzing the different ways teachers come to represent African American history. Here, the term ‘represent’ refers to the ways educators frame the meaning and significance of the Black past. Among the five stages, the latter four are most pertinent to the teaching of African American history (stage 1 completely ignores the experiences and voices of non-dominant groups). In the second stage, “heroes and holidays,” teachers fail to address the experiences, voices and contributions of African Americans in any meaningful way. Rather, educators portray African American history as a series of individual accomplishments and historical events are largely trivialized and decontextualized. In Stage 3 educators will provide students with

substantial information about the African American historical experience through the use of various materials and texts. A limitation of this approach, however, is that African American history is presented from a Euro-centric and/or male-centric perspective. This shortcoming is redressed in Stage 4 whereby educators include various perspectives in the teaching of African American history. The final stage builds on the strengths of the previous by explicitly addressing social issues such as racism, sexism and other injustices. This suggests that African American history is not presented as being disconnected from the present but rather portrays the historical experiences of African Americans as still relevant in critiquing contemporary society.

In the following section, I review empirical studies on teachers' representations and Black students' interpretations of African American history, respectively.

Empirical Studies

Teachers' representations of African American history. Previous research shows that teachers tend to emphasize two main themes in their teaching of African American history. The first of these is oppression, or the various ways Blacks have been subjugated throughout American history (Epstein, 2009; King, 2014, 2016; Wills, 2005). In his study on pre-service teachers' African American historical knowledge, King (2014, 2016) examined the extent to which participants' engagement in a summer program dedicated to learning African American history informed their interpretations of African American experience. While participants expressed a more complex understanding of race and racism, King found that oppressive elements continued to dominate participants' conception of the Black past. Largely absent from the participants' post-interpretations of African American history were notions of agency, which consequently portrayed Blacks as victims rather than actors. It is important to note, however, that

teachers differ in how they address notions of oppression in the classroom. For instance according to Epstein, Mayorga and Nelson (2011) empirical studies on teaching about race in middle and secondary history/humanities classrooms show that teachers in “traditional classrooms” tend to compartmentalize Black subjugation in selective periods, specifically slavery. In contrast, teachers that utilized culturally response teaching practices have been found to include “race as a legitimate topic of discussion, both historically and in contemporary society” (p. 5). Wills (2005) study demonstrates that teachers can also engage in practices that minimize the severity of hardships Blacks experienced in the past. His examination of two elementary school teachers’ narratives of Martin Luther King, Jr. revealed that while the teachers highlighted King’s encounters with discrimination, they consistently deflected students’ attempts to talk about racialized violence.

The second prominent theme is that of agency (Epstein, 2011; Howard, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Wills, 2005). That is, while teachers spoke about the hardships Blacks endured, they explicated how Blacks resisted and challenged their condition. In this way Blacks were portrayed as actors rather than victims. Teachers’ approach to talking about Blacks’ agency have been shown to vary as well. The teachers in Wills’ (2005) study, for instance, focused only on so-called nonviolent methods of resistance (e.g., marching) and the efforts of one individual; in this case, Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, acts of resistance are sometimes confined to specific periods such as the Civil Rights Movement, which obscures the nature and duration of the Black freedom struggle (Epstein, 2009; Wills, 1996).

Students’ interpretations of African American history. Similar to findings on teachers’ representations of African American history, the theme of oppression is a recurring

theme in studies examining Black students' interpretations of African American history (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Epstein, 2000; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008). Salient in students' conception of the past was that Blacks experienced great adversity in the form of prejudice, discrimination and racial violence and that people of African ancestry were considered to be an inferior group. In many cases, students were also able to make connections between Blacks' struggles and those of other non-dominant groups (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Bolgatz, 2006; Epstein, 2000; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011). As an example, Bettis, Cooks and Bergin (1994) created a 10-week curriculum on the Civil Rights Movement involving a group of Black and Latino high school students and found that at the end of the curriculum, participants conceived the Movement as a struggle for the rights of all minorities and not just for people of African ancestry. Similarly, after taking a culturally responsive humanities course, participants in Epstein, Mayorga and Nelson's (2011) study described African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans as having had to deal with adversity, racism and unequal opportunities (p. 12). In addition to making connections between different groups' experiences with oppression, students in most of these studies indicated that racism remains an issue in present-day society (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Epstein, 2000; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008). At the same time, students overwhelmingly portrayed Blacks historically as actively fighting to overcome these challenges (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Epstein, 2000; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008).

In the majority of these studies, findings suggest that students' understandings were shaped by how African American history was represented through teachers' instructional practices or the curriculum in use (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Bolgatz, 2006; Epstein,

Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008). In her study of students' perspectives of racial diversity in U.S. history, however, Epstein (2000) posits that students' "racialized identities significantly influenced their concepts of the historical experiences of racial groups" (p. 185). Despite the teacher in the study making an intentional effort to remind her students that people of color and women struggled for freedom for most of American history, the European American participants described America as a nation that represents individual rights and democracy while the African American students characterized U.S. history as fraught with racial oppression and struggle for freedom. This finding conflicts with Raupach's (2008) study, in which all of the student participants "represented history as interwoven with progress" (p. 165) regardless if they were African American or European American.

Summary and Conclusion

Proponents of teaching African American history in school have long considered such knowledge a vital component in the education of Black youth. Early pioneers of the Black history movement posited that learning the 'truth' of their past would instill Black children with a greater sense of pride, confidence as well as inspire them toward greater achievements (Bailey, Bell, Bruce, Woodson, 1999, Wright). Such assumptions were rooted in the premise that omissions and misrepresentations of Blacks' presence in U.S. history led Black children to develop a distorted sense of self. There lacked consensus, however, in what constituted the 'truth.' Some scholars, for example, believed that teachers should emphasize Blacks' accomplishments while others favored highlighting Blacks strengths as well as shortcomings. A number of contemporary scholars continue to underscore the importance of Black students being knowledgeable about their history (Akbar, 1997; Asante, 1991; Banks, 1991; Dagbovie, 2006;

Gay, 2005; Heard, 1999; Kershaw, 1989; Schugurensky, 2002). Challenges remain, however, in how African American history is represented in school, as many scholars have asserted that this past is often addressed superficially via overly simplistic and decontextualized accounts of historical figures and events (Aldridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; Hawkman & Castro, 2017; King, 2016, 2017; King & Brown, 2014; Smith, 2017).

In some respects, empirical studies examining teachers' representations of African American history support the claims above (Epstein, 2009; King, 2014, 2016; Wills, 1996, 2005). Other studies found, however, that teachers provided students with a more balanced account of the historical Black experience (Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Howard, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1997). These findings indicate that there are a range of ways teachers can and do represent African American history in the classroom.

A major issue expressed by scholars concerned with how African American history is portrayed in school is how this impacts students' understanding of the past (Aldridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; Hawkman & Castro, 2017; King, 2016, 2017; King & Brown, 2014; Smith, 2017; Thomas, 2012). For instance, Smith (2017) argues that focusing on "firsts" in the teaching of Black history may give students the impression that all significant racial barriers have been broken or lead to "hero worshipping" (p. 20). Similarly, Aldridge (2006) posits that heroic narratives typically presented in U.S. history textbooks such as that of Martin Luther King, Jr. are problematic because they "risk producing a generation that does not understand its history or the connection of that history to the contemporary world" (p. 663). This raises the question of how students process this knowledge in practice. What are students interpreting

about the nature of the historical Black experience as it is being talked about in class? What connections do they make to the present and themselves?

Overall, empirical research concerning Black students' understanding of African American history demonstrate that students largely understood the historical Black experience as one of oppression and agency; moreover, they perceived this as an on-going issue in contemporary society (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Epstein, 2000, Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008). With the exception of Epstein (2000), researchers in the foregoing studies found that students' understandings were shaped by how African American history was represented through their teachers' instructional practices or the curriculum in use. These findings lend support to scholars' claims that teachers' representations of African American history have import for students' historical and contemporary understandings.

The present study expands on the existing scholarship related to the teaching and learning of African American history in three key ways. First, though the purpose and value of teaching Black students their history has been well-established, there is a paucity of empirical research examining what meanings Black youth construct in practice. Without a deliberate attempt to uncover how students are processing the information being presented to them, we cannot be sure how students are being impacted by this knowledge. My dissertation addressed this limitation by investigating how students in this study interpreted content presented in their respective African American history class. Second, scholars concerned with the teaching of African American history in school posit that teachers' representations of historical Black figures and events have important consequences for students' understanding of the past and present; however, few studies have investigated how teachers' representations of African American history influence students'

understandings in practice. In addition, none of the empirical studies I reviewed examined students' understanding in relation to competing representations of African American history. If, as previous studies demonstrate, teachers can and do differ in how they portray, or talk about, the historical Black experience, what implications does this have for students' understandings? Third, virtually none explicitly investigate how teachers' representation of African American history influence students' understanding of the past and present (Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011). My study fills this gap by investigating how two teachers' contrasting representations of African American history shaped students' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine students' understanding of historical and contemporary Black experience in relation to their teacher's representation of African American history. A review of the literature revealed that while many claims have been made about the various ways Black students benefit by being exposed to their history, few empirical studies have examined how Black students respond to and are impacted by this knowledge in practice. Among these, existing studies have largely failed to investigate how teachers' competing depictions of African American history shape students' understandings. Framed by the theory of collective memory, I sought to explore the different stories teachers convey about the Black experience and the meanings students make in response to the narratives presented. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the teachers in this study represent the nature of the African American historical experience in their respective African American history courses?
2. What do student participants collectively remember learning about the nature of the historical Black experience?
3. To what extent do students believe the experiences of Black Americans have changed or remained the same based on their conception of African American history?

Epistemological Approach

This study was approached from an interpretivist research paradigm, which is a doctrine that “emphasizes analyzing meanings people confer on their own actions” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 20). In this way, interpretivist researchers prioritize understanding social phenomena rather than trying to explain it. Interpretivists, moreover, believe in multiple realities and truths and that these truths are historically situated and socially constructed (Galman, 2007). Reality, then, is considered subjective, with each participant’s experience regarded as being a valid truth. In accordance with the interpretivist paradigm, this study was conducted from the standpoint that knowledge gained from this investigation would be contextual. Because no one person or situation is the same, it stands to reason that whatever truths surfaced in the course of this study would apply to a particular moment in time.

The purpose of this study was to understand Black students’ historical and contemporary understandings in relation to the way their teachers depicted the nature of the historical Black experience. Using an interpretivist lens, the study was concerned with the meanings students made; in other words, what students described learning from their teachers through the content presented. As a qualitative study, I maintain that findings from this investigation must be contextualized. In interviews with students, for instance, every participant identified police brutality as one of the prevailing challenges facing the Black community. In particular, students brought up the killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Freddie Gray and were also keenly aware of the protests taking place across the country in response to their deaths. Several student participants viewed these events as evidence of at least one way that the struggles their ancestors fought against continue to plague people of African descent today. How

students in the study interpreted the meaning and significance of what they learned regarding African American history, then, cannot be separated from the social and political climate in which they were situated. Thus, my intention is not to generalize the results of this inquiry but to instead offer an analysis of students' experiences in a particular moment and space in time. Ultimately the hope is that this study can inform the teaching of African American history in other settings, as well as contribute to broader policy and scholarly conversations concerning the teaching of African American history.

Strategy of Inquiry

To answer my research questions, I employed ethnographic methods, which is a form of qualitative research concerned with the study of culture (Lichtman, 2010). Central to this form of inquiry is that research is conducted in natural settings and that researchers collect multiple forms of data to enhance validity of findings (Galman, 2007). Ethnographic studies typically include conducting observations in participants' natural settings (as opposed to a laboratory, for example), interviewing members of the community being studied, and collecting artifacts in order to gain a holistic picture of the phenomenon being investigated. In this study, I sought to obtain a holistic understanding of Black students' experiences learning African American history in two different schools by conducting classroom observations, interviewing students and teachers, and collecting curricular materials used in the classes.

Research Sites

To investigate how teachers' representations of African American history shape students' understandings of the historical and contemporary Black experience, I collected data from two classrooms--each from a different school--that were purposefully chosen to allow for a

comparison between teachers’ depictions of African American history and students’ meaning-making. Each school required high school students to complete a year-long course in African American history and had one teacher designated to teach the course. I determined that these sites would offer a sufficient level of contrast based on significant differences in mission and culture between the two schools and individual meetings I had with each teacher prior to the study concerning their approach to teaching their respective courses. Both sites were public charter schools located in a large urban city in the Northeastern United States and had similar student demographics. Each site served students in grades K-12, had a majority Black student population and had a large percentage of students from low-income communities (Table 1).

Table 1: School Demographics

School	Grade levels served	Enrollment size	High school enrollment *size *Grades 9-12	School racial composition	% Low income
Kuumba	K-12	650	185	Black 94.4% Hispanic 5% White .3% Asian .2% Other .2%	81.1%
Smith	K-12	1254	467	Black 98.5% Hispanic .6% White .2% Asian .2% Other .5%	93.2%

The African American history course at Kuumba and Smith were offered in students’ 10th and 9th grade year, respectively. Since each school had multiple sections of the course--two at Kuumba and four at Smith, I selected which specific section to immerse myself in after securing

each research site. Two main factors influenced my decision of what section to study. First, I wanted to be able to visit both schools on a daily basis. Consequently, I was mindful about choosing sections that did not take place at the same time. Second, I wanted to choose sections that had comparable levels of achievement in an effort to avoid findings being unduly attributed to differences in academic performance. At each school, I chose the section that the two teachers described as being of “mixed” ability; that is having a balance of students that were low, average and high performing. As a final note, findings from Kuumba reflect data collected from students’ African American *and* American history classes because the teacher used both courses to teach about the historical Black experience. Given that the purpose of this study was to investigate Black students’ experiences learning about African American history, I felt it was appropriate to observe both classes. The section I followed, however, remained the same. In addition, including the American history class at Kuumba allowed me to have a greater balance in data collected from both sites, as the African American history course at Kuumba took place only two days a week while the course at Smith took place five days a week. By including both courses, I was able to observe one section of students at each school an average of five classes a week. This is described in further detail under “Data Collection” (p. 35). Below, I provide an overview of each research site.

Kuumba Charter School. One of my research sites was Kuumba (a pseudonym). As an African-centered institution, Kuumba’s curriculum and school practices were infused with African values and practices. From its inception, the school’s founders sought to create an environment that was culturally responsive and affirming to the students they served whom were primarily of African-descent. In addition, Kuumba was grounded in the principles of freedom

and social justice whereby students would be prepared to be agents of change in their communities and the world. Some of the ways Kuumba employed African-centered values and pedagogy was through the use of fictive kinship (e.g., students and staff members addressing each other as “sister” or “brother”); morning circles (e.g., community meetings where students and staff recognize each other for their accomplishments and pay respects to their ancestors); and naming each grade after an African nations (e.g., Nubia, Zulu and Kush). As is common in most urban public schools today, students at Kuumba were required to wear a school uniform. Consistent with the culture of the school, the students’ uniforms had an African aesthetic. Students wore polo shirts and dashikis that came in the colors of black, red and green and gold. (It appeared that only male students would wear dashikis). Finally, students in all grade levels engaged in projects related to service and activism. Such projects were referred to as *Sba to Heka* and encouraged students to take “righteous action” in their communities. In the past, for instance, students have created documentaries that analyzed and challenged stereotypes perpetuated in the media, advocated for reform in the criminal justice system and mentored children in nearby daycare centers.

Smith Charter School. In contrast to Kuumba, Smith (pseudonym) followed a more traditional school curriculum, meaning the school did not utilize culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Whereas students at Kuumba referred to teachers and staff members as “Mama,” “Sister” and “Brother”, students at Smith addressed staff as “Mr.” and “Ms.” Additionally, class sections were named after colleges and universities--which all appeared to be predominately white institutions (PWIs) such as Brown and Harvard--and students’ uniforms were void of any African aesthetics. Another major difference between Smith and Kuumba was

that the former had a strong testing culture. For example, Smith administered quarterly benchmark assessments to help ensure students would perform well on the standardized assessment given at the end of the academic term. Students who were among the top scorers on the benchmarks were eligible to receive various prizes including field trips, food parties and dress down days where they could opt out of wearing the school uniform. I also noticed signs in the hallways about testing, including one that indicated how many days were left until the end of year assessment. Teachers, too, were susceptible to feeling pressure about the tests, as students' test scores were factored into their formal evaluations. Meanwhile at Kuumba, I was not aware students were in the midst of taking a standardized assessment until a few days before they were being administered.

In addition to its focus on standardized test scores, Smith also placed a high priority on student discipline. As part of the school uniform, students were required to carry a lanyard around their neck that contained a card used to monitor their behavior throughout the day. Teachers and staff members would mark the card whenever they saw students doing something praise-worthy or conversely when students engaged in behavior that was deemed inappropriate. Once, for example, I saw a student receive a mark for misbehavior after a staff member saw her twirling in the hallway as she walked to class. Taken together, Smith presented itself as a “no excuses” charter school (Kerstetter, 2016) that touted high expectations for academic achievement and strict discipline policies.

Participants

Students. I invited all students to participate in this study irrespective of sex, gender, academic performance or racial-ethnic identification. Although my study was directed toward students who identified as Black or African American, I did not make this a criteria for participation, as I did not want any student to feel singled out or excluded. Students were informed that participation entailed being interviewed about their experience in the class and sharing samples of their work. My goal was to have no less than half the number of students enrolled in each section participate in this study. With each section having 25 students, I therefore sought a minimum of 12 participants from each section. In practice, fewer students consented to being part of the study than I anticipated. Ten students agreed to participate from Kuumba; however, I excluded one student's responses from my analysis because of her irregular attendance. At Smith, eight agreed to serve as a participant. In total, then, I enlisted 17 student participants. Most of the participants were female. At Kuumba, the ratio of female to male participants was 6:3 while at Smith this ratio was 6:2. The participants were in the 9th grade at Smith and the 10th grade at Kuumba, which reflects when students were required to take the African American history course at their respective schools.

Racial-cultural identification. All of the students who agreed to participate in the study described themselves as being of African descent (Table 2, p. 35). On the assent forms, students identified their racial-cultural identity by marking "Black/African American," "White," "Asian," "Bi or Multi-racial" or "Other." I made the decision to combine Black and African American because both are commonly used in the U.S. to refer to people of African descent. During

interviews, students were given the opportunity to elaborate on how they view their racial-cultural identity.

At Kuumba, the students identified themselves as “Black/African American” (n=5) and “Bi or Multi-racial” (n=4) on their assent forms. In interviews, three of the four students from the latter group students expressed a strong Black consciousness. An example of this is one student who shared that he can see his Indian and Black heritage when he looks in the mirror but identifies as Black male in terms of his experiences. The fourth student consistently described himself as Black and white.

At Smith, all but one student identified him or herself as “Black/African American” (n=7). The seventh student indicated that she was “Bi or Multi-racial” (specifically, Black and white). When being interviewed, however, this student said she preferred to be viewed simply as “Black.” Meanwhile, the other six shared that they had family members who were African but most still viewed themselves as African American. There was one student who initially identified herself as “Black/African American” but described herself as African American and Indian when being interviewed.

Table 2: Student Participant Profiles

School	Number of students in the class	Number of participants sought	Number of students consented	Racial-cultural self-identification
Kuumba, Grade 10	25 Girls = 16 Boys = 9	12	*9 Girls = 6 Boys = 3 *One student was removed from final analysis of data	Black/African American: 5 Bi or Multi-racial: 4
Smith, Grade 9	25 Girls = 15 Boys = 10	12	8 Girls = 6 Boys = 2	Black/African American: 6 Bi or Multi-racial: 1

Prior interest. All student participants were asked to rate and explain how interested they were in wanting to learn about African American history prior to enrolling in their respective African American history courses. Each student selected a number between 1-5, with five meaning “very interested” and 1 meaning “not at all interested.”

At Kuumba, the average rating for prior knowledge was a 2. Brenda and Simone gave the highest ratings, with both indicating that their degree of prior interest was a five. Natasha and Jordan fell into the middle of the spectrum, reporting scores of 2 and 3.5 respectively. The remaining five students responded that they had no interest in wanting to learn about African American history whatsoever. The latter provided a near identical response as to why their prior interest was low--the thought of learning about their history simply did not occur to them. Elena attributed this to not knowing she would be taking an African American history class prior to

enrolling at Kuumba. On the other hand, Ezekial and Taylor claimed they were accustomed to only being exposed to the history of Europeans.

The student participants at Smith reported a slightly higher degree of prior interest than those from Kuumba. Whereas the average rating for Kuumba was a 2, the average score at Smith was a 2.75. Similar to Kuumba, few student participants at Smith had extensive prior exposure to African American history other than Black History Month or occasional units in their social studies classes. In addition, some students complained that previous teachers did not go into depth about the Black experience or focused mainly on Europeans.

Prior knowledge. In addition to asking each student participant to rank their degree of prior interest, I asked respondents to indicate and describe their degree of prior knowledge of African American history before enrolling in their respective African American history courses. Each student was thus asked to give a score from 1-5 asked to elaborate on his/her score.

At Kuumba, the average rating for student participants was a 2. Once again, Brenda and Simone gave the highest scores. Both said their level of prior knowledge was a 4 and credited their previous experience attending African-centered schools. Brian rated his prior knowledge a 3.5 as he knew the surface of a lot of the content that Sis. Shabazz was teaching. Close behind him was Nate, who attributed his score of 2 to only knowing about “Frederick Douglass and stuff.” The remaining five students contended that their level of prior knowledge about African American history was approximately a 1.

There were two primary reasons given for why these students provided low ratings. First, four claimed that their previous schools only taught them basic and/or surface level information. This namely included learning about slavery, standard Black heroes (e.g. Rosa Parks, Martin

Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass), and the civil rights movement. Reflecting on her experience learning about Blacks' enslavement, for example, Elena contended that she "knew there was slavery, but I didn't know what was actually going on in slavery. So it was like I just got like half of the story. I was taught that slavery wasn't all that bad." Second, three of the five students who claimed to have almost no prior knowledge recalled learning only about Europeans.

At Smith, the average rating of all students combined was 3.5. This moderate score seemingly contradicted students' assertions that their previous schools seldom taught about African American history. One possible explanation for this disconnect is that Mr. Abati taught a lot of the content that students had already been exposed to. Many of the students recalled learning about "the usual" Black figures, as one student said, such as Harriet Tubman, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X (n=6). Other recurring topics included slavery, the civil rights movement and racial segregation (n=6). Thus, many Smith student participants may have believed they had a sufficient background in African American history because, as Robert noted, they were taught "the stuff we learnin' now."

Among the eight student respondents, Rashid and Brittany were the only two who claimed to have frequent conversations about the Black experience during their upbringing. Four shared that this occurred periodically or that they began when they started taking the class. The remaining two did not appear to have any conversations about Black history in the home. The majority said they gained their prior knowledge from school.

In sum, both student groups identified as being of African descent. In addition, both groups reported comparable levels of prior interest and knowledge.

Teachers. Kuumba and Smith each had one teacher designated to teach African American history to its high school students. Both instructors self-identified as being of African ancestry but were of different genders. The teacher at Kuumba, Sis. Shabazz (pseudonym), was female while the instructor at Smith, Mr. Abati (pseudonym), was male. Each teacher consented to having one of his or classes observed, being interviewed and providing copies of curricular materials they used in the course.

School administrators. In addition to recruiting students and teachers to participate in this investigation, I interviewed two school administrators from Smith who had direct involvement with the design and implementation of the school's African American history course. I did not interview any school administrators from Kuumba in light of the fact that Sis. Shabazz designed the course and created the curriculum in use, including all major assessments. In contrast, the curriculum Mr. Abati used was designed by the charter network's curriculum writer, who also created all formal assessments for the course. In light of these differences, I did not find it necessary to ask other staff members about design and implementation of the African American and American history courses at Kuumba since Sis. Shabazz oversaw this process.

Data Collection

In keeping with traditional ethnographic methods, data collection included observations, interviews and artifact collection (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Creswell, 2009). In what follows I will outline the nature and purpose data I collected at each school site. An overview of this information is provided in Table 3 (p. 47)

Observations. I was embedded at each research site during the 2014-2015 academic year between the months of January and June. In total, I was embedded in each school site for six

months where I observed an average of five classes per week. Over the course of the study, I conducted approximately 100 hours of observations at each school, or 200 hours of observations combined. Per approval of the instructors, I took audio recordings of the classes, which I used in transcribing the fieldnotes.

My observations were primarily based in one section of an African American history class at each school site. As I stated previously, I observed one group of students in the American and African American history courses since both taught students about the historical Black experience. Sis. Shabazz's explanation for this was that at Kuumba, "African American history *is* American history." The reason Kuumba offered both classes was so they were in compliance with the school district's mandate that all high school students complete a course in African American history. Despite the two course offerings, Sis. Shabazz did not see them as being distinct classes; rather, she used the African American history class as "an enhancement of the American history class" (Interview, July 30, 2015). At the time of this study, Kuumba students were required to take both classes during their sophomore year--the American history class Monday through Friday (five days per week) and the African American history class on Mondays and Thursdays (twice per week). Altogether, I observed six classes per week at Kuumba--the African American history class twice a week and the American history class four days a week. The exceptions to this were times when a class was cancelled.

In contrast to Kuumba, Smith required students to take the African American history course during their 9th grade year. Mr. Abati taught the course five days a week and it was the only class designed to formally teach students about Black history. Unlike Sis. Shabazz's explanation of why Kuumba offered an African American history course--that it was meant to

meet the district's academic requirements--Ms. Wilson, one of the administrators I spoke with at Smith, shared in an interview that as a charter the school was not obligated to teach Black history. Another administrator proposed the course to diversify the curriculum and the head of the charter network ultimately agreed to implement it beginning in the 2011-2012 academic year. Ms. Smith fervently supported this decision: "We need to have [the African American history course] because our kids need to understand where they came from and understand that American history isn't White people history. There were thousands of people that helped establish the country we are today. In my mind [the course] was almost like righting a wrong of history teaching" (Interview 5.15.15). According to Ms. Wilson, students took African American history in their 9th grade year because there were four social studies courses already in place during students' 7th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade years--Ancient World, Modern History, U.S. History and U.S. Government, respectively. Therefore, it seemed logical to place African American history during the only year that had not been designated a social studies course. Ms. Wilson added that she felt students should learn about Black history earlier in their academic career than later: "[I]n the arc of a student's career--engaging with, interacting with and really internalizing African American history, it should not be pushed off until later in their high school career." At Smith, I observed one section of Mr. Abati's African American class five days a week except when there was a scheduling conflict.

In addition to immersing myself in one section of an African American class at each school site--or in the case of Kuumba, an African *and* African American history class--I also spent time observing the dynamics of the school as a whole. This was based on the assumption that each school's culture would bear some influence, even if marginally, on the teaching and

learning of African American history. In an effort to gain an understanding of each site's culture, I observed common areas in both schools such as hallways and cafeterias. While doing so, I paid particular attention to the aesthetics of the school (i.e., posters, flyers and bulletin boards), expectations for student conduct via school rules and interactions among students and between students and staff members (i.e., how they spoke and engaged with one another). At Kuumba, I also had the opportunity to observe and sometimes participate in more intimate gatherings, such as their morning circles, assemblies and annual day-long retreat. In addition to gaining a more in-depth portrait of the school's culture and climate, I was able to build more of rapport with students and staff members that I did at Smith. Ultimately, this resulted in my feeling more like a member of the Kuumba school community as opposed to just a visitor. I would gladly have welcomed the chance to attend more functions at Smith, but I was either not privy to such opportunities or they were not available. For instance, I looked forward to attending Smith's Black History Month assembly that Mr. Ababi organized while I was there. This did not happen, though, as the assembly was canceled due to inclement weather and scheduling issues. In total, I spent approximately 60 hours taking field notes of spaces outside the classroom between both sites combined.

My role during this study was primarily a non-participant observer. While in the classrooms I mainly sat in the back or sides of the room taking notes and saying very little or nothing at all unless spoken to or asked to engage. However, there were times at both school sites when I became more of a participant. These occasions were always prompted by the teachers and ranged from contributing to class discussions to being a part of class activities. As I described earlier, in some ways I felt more connected to the teacher and students at Kuumba than at Smith.

In addition to attending some of Kuumba's school-wide events, I also accompanied Sis. Shabazz on trips outside the school such as when she took her 10th grade students to the African American Museum. Perhaps the best illustration of how immersed I became at Kuumba was the fact that I was put in charge of Sis. Shabazz's African American and American history classes on at least two occasions. The first time this happened, Sis. Shabazz called to inform me she needed to take a personal day from work, and I volunteered to fill in for her. The second time, the school's dean was brought in to momentarily cover Sis. Shabazz's class because she was needed in the office. Soon, he himself was called out the classroom, leaving me to watch over the students.

Given that the overarching goal of this study was to examine how teachers' representations of African American history shape students' historical and contemporary understandings, my observations were centered around the following broad areas: (a) how teachers talked about the Black experience (i.e. what they emphasized and the terminology they used) (b) what questions teachers asked (c) teachers' daily lesson objectives (d) how teachers responded to students' questions and comments (e) the way teachers navigated classroom discussions (i.e., responses that teachers challenged and praised or instances where they redirected the conversation) (f) students' reactions to content the teacher presented (g) how students responded to teachers' questions (h) the ways students engaged in lesson activities and (i) questions students raised. To capture the culture of the class as a whole, I also noted the nature of interactions among students and between students and their teacher.

Each of the teachers gave me permission to audio record their lessons. During all of my observations, I used my phone to record classroom discourse while taking manual notes on the

areas listed above. I did this for two reasons. For one, it was sometimes difficult to capture everything the teachers and students were saying, especially when they were engaged in back and forth dialogue. By the time I wrote down one quote, the next person would already be speaking. Second, because I was observing both the teachers and students, sometimes I had to choose where to focus my attention. When Sis. Shabazz showed videos in class, for instance, she always stood close to the screen and narrated the images being projected. It was important to document her comments to examine how Sis. Shabazz was portraying the historical Black experience. At the same time, it was also essential to note how students were reacting to what they were seeing. In these cases, I was almost always sure to miss something. For these reasons, the audio recordings served as a supplement to the handwritten notes I took. While transcribing my fieldnotes--which I completed within 24 hours of each observation--I simultaneously played the audio recording to fill in any gaps in my notes. In addition, I only transcribed the parts that were relevant to the study. Once I completed my notes, I uploaded the recordings onto a software program and subsequently deleted them from my phone.

Interviews. In addition to daily observations, I conducted interviews with the students and teachers at each school site, as well as two school administrators from Smith. All of the interviews were semi-structured. Thus, I used an interview guide with questions I wanted to ask of each participant; however, using this format gave me flexibility to ask impromptu questions or delve more deeply into a participant's' response when I found it necessary to. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. I interviewed students in a safe, confidential space at their school. I initially planned to meet with students before school, after school or at lunch, but this proved cumbersome due to students' forgetfulness and difficulty in arranging transportation. Fortunately,

both teachers allowed me to meet with student participants during their African American history class. At Kuumba, this included the American history class as well. I also received permission from the students' parents and school principals. Interviews with teachers and school administrators took place in times and locations that were most convenient for them. For example, I met with one of the administrators at the school while she ate lunch. With regards to the teachers, I typically spoke with them after their class or at the end of the school day after all the students had cleared the room.

Students. I interviewed students between April and June 2015. I generally met with each student only once but there were some with whom I had to schedule a follow-up interview because we simply needed more time. I purposefully met with students toward the end of the school year so students would feel comfortable speaking to me. I therefore used the months before I started interviewing to develop a rapport with students in the class. I did this by learning students' names, speaking with them informally about what they were learning in the class and asking them about their hobbies and activities outside of class. Over time, some students also began sharing details about their home life. Some of the students with whom I had the strongest rapport ultimately consented to participate in my study but by no means did this apply to everyone. There were some participants who I spoke with on a regular basis and others who I interacted with less frequently. Nonetheless, by the time I met with students, I knew each of their names and visa versa. In addition, I had had conversations with each of them on some level. Because of this, I believe students felt safe to share their honest thoughts and opinions with me. I think the fact that I identified as a Black woman also played a role in this. Although some students initially did not know I was Black--some shared that they thought I was Asian--they

learned over time that this was a salient part of my identity. During interviews I noticed that most of the students, if not all, would use words such as “our,” “us,” and “we” when talking about the Black community. For example, *our* people have been through a lot; *we* are strong. It is possible they were not including me in this collective experience; however, the candor with which they spoke to me about both the strengths and shortcomings of the Black community led me to believe that they were.

In my interviews with students, I was primarily interested in examining students’ understanding of the Black experience in relation to their teachers’ representations of Black history. Therefore, the majority of questions I asked students were centered around their perceptions of the historical and contemporary Black experience. I specifically wanted to know their views about what it is like to be Black and living in America today compared to the way it was in the past. Through these interviews I also sought to learn what students thought about the structure, content and value of the course as well any previous exposure they may have had to Black history curricula. Gathering this information helped me to see how students’ understandings may have been informed by their prior knowledge and experiences and explore how teachers’ representations shaped students’ overall experience in the class. When pertinent, I integrated this information in my discussion of key findings to enhance my analysis of students’ understandings. Readers can find the complete protocol in Appendix A.

Teachers. I spoke informally with each teacher about the nature of their instruction on various occasions throughout the study. In addition, I conducted formal interviews with each teacher both during and the end of the school term. I met with Sis. Shabazz three times and Mr. Abati twice. Each interview spanned approximately one hour each. The purpose of these

interviews was two-fold. On one hand, research has shown that various factors inform teachers' instructional practices including his or her knowledge, thoughts and beliefs (Fang, 1996). I therefore interviewed each teacher to understand how their objectives for teaching African American history, conception of the historical Black experience and other aspects of their background that may have influenced their representation of Black history in the classroom. Second, interviewing the instructors gave me the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about what I observed in the classroom as well as allow them to comment on themes that emerged from the data. To this end, the interview protocol for teachers included questions about their prior experiences teaching and learning African American history, attitudes about the significance of students--especially Black students--learning about the historical Black experience, what their objectives were (i.e. ideal learning outcomes for their students), and to what degree they believed their social-cultural identity influenced their pedagogical practices (Appendix B).

School administrators. Finally, as part of this study I also interviewed two school administrators from Smith about the design and implementation of the African American history curriculum. These meetings were instrumental in giving me greater insight into the goals of the African American history course, recommended instructional strategies, and how curricular materials were selected. This information provided a richer context for the patterns observed in the course as well as topics and issues raised in my interview with Mr. Abati. I did not meet with any school administrators from Kuumba because Sis. Shabazz designed the course and curriculum herself whereas Mr. Abati did not.

Curricular artifacts. The third and final form of data I collected for this study were copies of curricular materials used in each of the classes I observed. This included unit and

individual lesson plans, handouts, assignments, assessments and samples of student work. All of the materials were obtained from the teachers and student work was only collected from those whom submitted assent and consent forms. Student work samples comprised a small proportion of curricular artifacts I collected, for it proved difficult to find a system for doing so that did not burden the teachers. The work that I did collect was mainly essays and only represented some of the student participants. Student work samples were consequently used to supplement the findings but did not constitute as a main source of analysis. Similar to fieldnotes and interview transcripts, artifacts were analyzed for themes in how the Black experience was depicted to students.

Table 3: Data Collection Methods

Data source	Description
Non-participant Observations	<p>Kuumba: 6 classes per week (American history two days a week; African American history four days a week)</p> <p>Smith: 5 classes per week (African American history)</p>
Semi-structured interviews	<p>Kuumba: 9 students; 1 teacher</p> <p>Smith: 8 students; 1 teacher; 2 school administrators</p>
Curricular artifacts	Handouts, assignments, assessments and student work

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in two phases. The first phase took place as the study was being carried out and took the form of reflective memos. After every observation, I transcribed my

fieldnotes, which I supplemented with audio recordings I took of each class. After transcribing the notes, I would note patterns I saw emerging primarily with regards to 1) teacher's representations of African American history and 2) how students were responding to and interpreting the content presented. Typically at the end of each week, I would write an analytic memo in which I reflected on emerging patterns within and across both classrooms.

The second phase of analysis commenced at the conclusion of data collection. I began by using Patterson's (1970) paradigm on prevailing conceptions of Black history to help make sense of how teachers were representing African American history and how students were interpreting their teacher's historical narratives. These conceptions were: 1) catastrophic 2) survivalist and 3) contributionist. Using a qualitative software program, I subsequently went through fieldnotes and interview data and marked teacher and student discourse accordingly. For example, if Sis. Shabazz or Mr. Abati made reference to some form of struggle, I labeled this as "catastrophic". Similarly, if a student participant recalled an achievement of some form, I labeled this as "contributionist." This process provided me with a baseline for interpreting the data. The process of analyzing students' understanding of the contemporary Black experience was more inductive but followed a similar process of reviewing the data, noting patterns, refining codes and applying it to the data.

Next, I read through each category of data and kept a running list of recurring concepts. Once I had an exhaustive list I went through the process of merging similar concepts. For example within the "catastrophic" category, I merged lynchings, slavery and sharecropping together because they all reflected types of catastrophe. If an item did not fit in one of the three

aforementioned categories, I place this in a separate group. I repeated this process of refining several times until I had a firm coding scheme that I then applied to the data.

After coding the data, I was then able to analyze the relationship between teachers' representations and student understandings and patterns across the two classrooms.

Validity

Qualitative researchers often include measures taken to assure readers that a study's findings are credible and reliable. Willis (2007) asserts, however, that such practices are foundationally rooted in post positivist research, which aims to search for generalizable truths. The interpretivist research paradigm, on the other hand, accepts the existence of multiple realities, that these realities are socially constructed, and is more concerned with understanding phenomena rather than looking for universal laws (Galman, 2007). This study adopts the latter approach (see "Epistemological Approach", p.). As such, my intention for providing the following information is not to convince readers that my study is valid but to instead discuss strategies I used to conduct a thorough examination, be transparent about how my positionality informed this investigation.

Multiple forms of data. Most commonly referred to as "triangulation," researchers often different data sources to "build a coherent justification for themes" (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Triangulation can take different forms (Willis, 2007). In this study I used multiple data collection methods in order to gain a more holistic understanding of how teachers were representing the historical Black experience in the classroom and the ways students made meaning of the content presented. The strategies I employed in this study were observations of the classrooms and schools, semi-structured interviews with teachers, students and staff members and artifact

collection (see “Data Collection,” p.). Utilizing these different data collection methods allowed me to view this phenomenon from multiple angles as well as corroborate findings using various types of evidence. (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 174).

Member checking. Throughout this investigation, I provided numerous opportunities for participants to share their perspectives of what I interpreted from the data. This was done formally in interviews with participants and informally during impromptu conversations. The latter often took place immediately before or after class. The benefit of this strategy was that it allowed members to expand on or challenge my interpretations, which led to a more informed analysis. In the event that a member disagreed with my preliminary conclusions, the participant was able to clarify his/her thoughts or actions. I note this in my presentation of findings, so readers are aware of instances when this occurred.

Researcher positionality. Many qualitative researchers presume that all researchers have biases and they invariably influence collection and analysis of data (Lichtman, 2010). This may be especially apparent for those engaging in qualitative work, as “all information is filtered through the researcher’s eyes and ears and is influenced by his or her experience, knowledge, skill, and background” (p. 16). I share my biases in the final section of this chapter in an effort to be transparent of potential ways my personal and professional background shaped the information I gathered and how I interpreted it (Creswell, 2009, p. 192).

Presentation of discrepant information. Any given community is likely have a multitude of perspectives and experiences (Lecompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 146). Thus, in addition to presenting converging themes, I include information that runs counter to dominant patterns identified in the data in order to provide readers with a more realistic and valid account

of the communities investigated in this study (Creswell, 2009). When presenting student findings, for example, I include perspectives that did not align with dominant trends so that students' experiences are not presented monolithically. For teachers, I present discrepant information by including examples of how teachers represented Black history in ways that did not conform to the dominant narrative that emerged from the data.

Prolonged time in the field. I was embedded at each school site for six months, through which I conducted approximately 200 hours of observations. In addition to assisting me in developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon examined, being in the classroom for an extended period of time may have made students and teachers feel more at ease with my presence. As a consequence, it is possible members were more willing to present authentic behaviors, thoughts and feelings as opposed to “performing” or saying things they felt I wanted to hear from them.

Confidentiality

School sites and participants were all assigned pseudonyms to keep their identities private. This also includes students whom I observed in the class but were not actual participants. Participants were assured that I would be the only person who would have access to the data collected and that this information would be password protected. To further protect the privacy of my research sites and participants, I omitted or intentionally kept vague information that I felt could possibly compromise their anonymity. Readers may notice, for example, that I never specify the exact role of the administrators I interviewed at Smith. In this case, I purposefully left out this information to prevent readers from identifying who they are nor the school they work for.

Researcher Positionality

My research was informed by the interpretivist paradigm, which is an approach to knowledge that emphasizes meaning-making, the existence of multiple truths and understanding rather than explaining social phenomena (Lichtman, 2010, p. 20). One of the key assumptions of interpretivism is that all research is inherently value-laden to the extent that it is informed by the researcher's background, prior knowledge, and experiences (Lichtman, 2010, p. 20). Researchers who subscribe to this paradigm understand that it is difficult, if not impossible, to control for biases, and that their interpretations of how others make sense of the world are influenced by the researcher's personal experiences (Creswell, 2009, p. 9). In what follows, I consider possible ways my personal and professional identity influenced data collection and analysis.

First, I am a woman of African descent. In light of my racial-ethnic identity, I may have been viewed as an insider in the classrooms I observed where almost everyone--including the teacher--was also of African ancestry. Having an insider status could have afforded me certain advantages during data collection. For example, the students may have felt less uneasy about having a stranger observing and listening in on their discussions and therefore safe to express their honest thoughts and feelings than if I were a member of a different community. On the other hand, being viewed as an insider could also have compromised my position as a researcher. At times I was asked to offer my perspective on or share my experiences with a particular topic. Occasionally I also struggled with refraining from participating in class activities because of the comfortability I felt in the class and, likewise, them with me. While I believe my participation

was an asset to this study, periodically acting as a participant may have led me to overlook data that would have further informed my findings.

Another source of bias stems from my teaching background. Prior to enrolling in my doctoral program, I spent nine years teaching English to middle and high school students in the inner city. I was drawn to work specifically in low-income urban communities upon learning that most schools in these areas were beleaguered by inadequate resources, poor academic outcomes and that Black students were disproportionately impacted by these issues since they comprised a large percentage of students attending inner city schools. My identity as a Black woman made my work in the classroom personal. While it was important to me that my students succeeded academically, I saw my work as integral to the viability of the larger Black community that my students and I were a part of. As such, I felt it was just as important that my students be able to challenge the status quo, think critically and use what they were learning inside the classroom to support and uplift our community. Because of my attitudes about teaching--particularly as it relates to the education of Black youth--it is possible I was more critical of what I saw and heard than another researcher might have been. In short, a researcher who did not share my views about what "good" teaching looked like may have interpreted the data differently than I did.

Finally, I embarked on this study with my own ideas about the value and purpose of teaching Black youth their history, both of which were informed by my perceptions of the contemporary and historical experiences of Black people. For one, I believe Black history should be taught critically. Emphasizing what Blacks have endured, achieved and contributed to society could serve as a source of inspiration for Black children and affirm their cultural identity. At the same time I agree with fellow scholars' assertion that Black history should encompass multiple

narratives, so students are able to gain a nuanced understanding of the Black past (Thomas, 2012; Wills, 2005). I also believe it is equally important, if not more so, for teachers to help Black youth see how Black history is relevant to the present and themselves. In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, increasing racial tensions and other issues in our current social-political climate, young Black people should be aware that while the present-day Black community may have more freedoms and opportunities than it did historically, there is still much work to be done. My stance toward Black history led me to be sensitive to instances when teachers did or did not engage in practices that I felt were most beneficial for students. While one may argue that this contributed to a skewed analysis of teachers' representations of Black history, I maintain that my bias was an asset. The purpose of this study was not to evaluate the teachers but rather to understand students' experiences learning African American history. It therefore would not have served me to depict one teacher more favorably than the other but to remain as neutral as possible. Moreover, my commitment to this topic and the participants with whom I built relationships with through this study enhanced my sense of responsibility to maintaining the integrity of this study as opposed to detracting from it.

CHAPTER 4

SIS. SHABAZZ'S REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Now again, I always try to bring this back to present day. How does this relate to us today? Young people today, what are you fighting for?! What are you standing up for? What injustice have you decided that I can't live with this still going on in existence? If there is an injustice going on, what am i going to do?

- Sis. Shabazz

I began observing Sis. Shabazz's African American and American history classes in mid-December of the 2014-2015 academic year. By this time, Sis. Shabazz was approximately three months into both curricula. Between the two classes Sis. Shabazz's instruction on Black history spanned from ancient Africa to the Black Power era. Moreover, these were taught non-sequentially. As an example, Sis. Shabazz taught about the Civil Rights Movement before Reconstruction and circled back to slavery. In short, she taught in a very circular fashion. The curricula she used was her own, and she guarded this carefully. Indeed, during of our interviews she jokingly recounted the way she reacted when I asked for a copy of her curriculum. "That's why I was like, you want my curriculum? You want *all* my stuff? No, I'm kidding" (Interview, June, 30, 2015). Despite how protective she felt over her materials, she did in fact share these with me, which proved to be a valuable source of data in in examining her portrayal of the historical Black experience in the classroom.

Overall, Sis. Shabazz portrayed African American history as a *continuity narrative*. In doing so, Sis. Shabazz depicted Blacks' historical experience as mired in struggle and that this continues to define the nature of Blacks' existence today. At the same time, Sis. Shabazz explicitly emphasized that people of African ancestry actively resisted their subjugation and routinely encouraged her students to follow in their ancestors' footsteps. My finding echoed how Sis. Shabazz characterized her approach to teaching U.S. history. In wanting "to tell a story" and "to make that story make sense," Sis. Shabazz intentionally strived to foreground the struggles different communities experienced, including "where are they now, why are they where they are and how we [can] do something about that" (Interview, June 30, 2015). Thus, when teaching the African American and American history courses, Sis. Shabazz made a concerted effort to recall the struggles Blacks faced, show how this relates to the challenges Black people face today and encourage students to take action on these issues.

In this chapter, I will use an examination of fieldnotes, interview data and curricular materials to discuss how Sis. Shabazz represented, or talked about, the nature of the historical Black experience in the African American and American history courses. First, I provide a portrait of Sis. Shabazz's pedagogical approach to teaching the two classes and the environment of the classroom. Following this, I present three major themes that comprised of Sis. Shabazz's depiction of African American history. I refer to these as *oppression*, *resistance* and *the struggle continues--a call to action*. My goal is to show readers how the ways in which Sis. Shabazz privileged and talked about certain aspects of the historical Black experience lent itself to shaping a particular way of remembering, or understanding, the nature of the Black past and its connection to the present. Readers will note that student participants are referred to by name.

A Portrait of Sis. Shabazz and the Classroom Environment

Sis. Shabazz was an African American woman in her late 30's and a social studies teacher by trade. Having minored in African American studies as an undergraduate and later earning her masters in African American Studies, teaching the African American and American history courses at Kuumba ““was just natural” (Interview, June 16, 2015). In total, Sis. Shabazz said she had been teaching African American history for the past 15 years--the length of her teaching career--as she was adamant that she never taught African American history as separate from ‘other’ types of history. She explained that the only reason she taught African American history as a distinctive course at Kuumba was because of a district mandate requiring all students to complete a course in African American history. In addition to her role as a teacher, Sis. Shabazz had a host of other responsibilities at the school. This included serving as head of the social studies department and organizing Kuumba’s annual African Cultures Quiz Bowl. Toward the end of the year Sis. Shabazz was also tasked with leading the yearbook committee.

Standing at 5 feet, 3 inches tall, many of Sis. Shabazz’s students often towered over her but no one dared to challenge her authority. The few times I saw a student attempt to do so, the others in the class would wait quietly to see how Sis. Shabazz was going to respond. At the same time, though, all of the participants expressed admiration for the passion with which she taught the class. In many ways, Sis. Shabazz embodied Kuumba’s African-centered culture, from wearing her hair in locs to the way in which she decorated her classroom. Her walls and shelves were adorned with African and African American art and posters and the colors used in the room were mostly some variation of black, red and green. With regards to Sis. Shabazz’s instructional style, she often operated her classroom as if it were a town hall meeting. She rarely lectured but

rather spent much of class time--sometimes the entire period--standing on the side or center of the room fielding questions and facilitating class discussions. Where ever Sis. Shabazz stood, the students--who sat in groups of four or five desks clustered together--typically kept a steady gaze at her as she spoke. The few I did not see looking at her would be quietly looking down at their desks. In this way, time never seemed to be of essence. If Sis. Shabazz did not get through her lesson, she would simply pick back up the next class.

Sis. Shabazz used a wide range of 'memory text' (Hill, 2009), or curricular materials, in the African American and American history courses. She had access to a textbook adopted by the school district to teach the African American history course but preferred to teach students about the historical experience using novels instead. Sis. Shabazz acquired an appreciation for using literature to teach Black history while pursuing her Master's in African American Studies. During the academic year in which I observed her, Sis. Shabazz had students read a wide range of books including *We Want Freedom* by Mumia Abul Jamal (2004), *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), and *Mis-Education of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson (1933) and *When and Where I Enter* by Paula Giddings (1984). In addition to novels, Sis. Shabazz showed a wide range of films to teach students about the different historical periods. For instance she used *Amistad* (Spielberg, 1997) to help talk about slavery, a documentary on sharecropping to discuss Blacks' experiences during Reconstruction, and *The Butler* (Daniels, 2013), which she used to discuss slavery to the Great Depression to the Black Power era. Other materials Sis. Shabazz used to teach Black history included field trips, and supplemental texts and handouts that she created herself.

Oppression

In teaching her students about the historical Black experience, Sis. Shabazz stressed that people of African descent faced innumerable challenges throughout our nation's past. It is a theme that would arguably be difficult for anyone to avoid when teaching about the Black experience in America; however, given the choice between expounding on Blacks' achievements or the injustices they faced, Sis. Shabazz tended to privilege the latter. During an interview with Sis. Shabazz I asked whether she agreed with my assessment that she emphasized oppression through her teaching of Black history: "Yeah, I guess so," she replied. "I don't know of a time period in American history where we *weren't* struggling," Sis. Shabazz said with a chuckle (Interview, June 30, 2015). This sentiment aligned with her teaching. Whether she was talking to students about slavery or the Civil Rights movement, Sis. Shabazz spoke in great detail about the arduous conditions Blacks lived through. Sis. Shabazz added, though, that she would like to think she stressed how Blacks were conquerors over struggle. She conceded that perhaps she did not talk as much about this aspect of Black history "other than the fact that [Blacks] are here today." As evidence, she pointed to the existence of African-centered schools and the preservation of African culture: "It's a recurring theme...this idea that [Blacks] are victors," remarked Sis. Shabazz. "[At Kuumba] you'll have like the recognition time where we're recognizing different honorable or quoted African Americans" (Interview, June 30, 2015). Here, Sis. Shabazz was referring to how students and staff gathered every morning at the start of the day to share announcements, congratulate individuals for their recent accomplishments and pour libations to pay homage to their ancestors. Thus Sis. Shabazz believed, or rather hoped, that the school's culture reinforced the ways Blacks triumphed over their obstacles even if she did not.

Sis. Shabazz did not just teach her students about the types of injustices Blacks encountered, but the severity of them. She did so by giving graphic oral and visual details of the violence and humiliation inflicted upon Black people, which often aroused feelings of anger and shock among students in the class. An example of this is the time Sis. Shabazz had the class analyze two poems by Langston Hughes, a poet who came into prominence during the Harlem Renaissance. They were “I, Too, Sing America” (1954) and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921). In this particular lesson, Sis. Shabazz instructed the class to identify evidence from “I, Too, Sing America” that highlighted “the struggles that Blacks experienced during the Reconstruction era” (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2015). In her usual fashion, Sis. Shabazz asked for volunteers to share out their responses after they were given a few minutes to work on their task. A student raised her hand and said that Blacks were forced to eat in the kitchen because of their skin color. Sis. Shabazz followed up by asking the student what was happening contextually during this time period that would cause Blacks to have to go into the kitchen or into the back of the house. After a few moments of silence, Sis. Shabazz called on Elena to assist.

Elena: Segregation

Sis. Shabazz: Okay, just again elaborate on that. What do you mean by segregation? Segregation is just the separation of two groups of people due to discrimination.

Elena: They separated the Blacks and I guess the whites came over to eat...

[Elena did not know what else to say, so she stopped herself from continuing her thought. Not satisfied with the responses she had received thus far, Sis. Shabazz asked the class to think more deeply about why Blacks were treated this way. Jordan raised her hand.]

Jordan: They're ashamed.

Sis. Shabazz: Who is 'they'? Be specific.

Jordan: People that are, I guess, wherever the Blacks are living. The people that they're living under. They're ashamed for their friends to see that they have a Black person actually eating in the same room, the same table as them, so they're ashamed.

Sis. Shabazz: You're on the right track, but maybe confused. [It] sounds like you're saying Blacks were able to eat at the same kitchen as whites.

Jordan: No, [I'm] saying that's what people Blacks living under were allowing to happen. But when whites came around, it was like alright you gotta get in the kitchen. I don't want them to see that what we do behind closed doors.

Sis. Shabazz: Oh, okay. But again, [you're] suggesting that some Blacks were able to eat in the same kitchen as whites.

This back and forth dialogue over why Blacks were forced to retreat in the presence of whites continued for the next several minutes. It was not enough for students to know that Blacks and whites were segregated; nor, did Sis. Shabazz want her students to think "some" Blacks were able to occupy the same spaces as whites as she thought Jordan was suggesting. It is also important to note that Jordan did not specify whites as the reason Blacks had to conceal themselves until Sis. Shabazz paraphrased her response. Initially, Jordan replied that "people" were ashamed to have their friends discover that they eat with Black people. After Sis. Shabazz specifically mentioned whites, however, Jordan altered her response to say "when whites came around, it was like alright, you gotta get in the kitchen." Sis. Shabazz's facilitation of this discussion, then, served not only to convey that Black people were mistreated but that whites were the perpetrator. After more questioning, Sis. Shabazz finally received the answer she was looking for when Brian replied that Blacks were seen as "lesser beings" while whites were deemed "supreme."

Sis. Shabazz: And where did that come from? Where did the idea come from that blacks are of lesser status? That Blacks are not good enough to eat off same dishes that [whites] eat off of? Where did that come from?

Nate: I believe we're in the enslavement period.

Sis. Shabazz: Yes, exactly! Remember that Reconstruction directly followed the enslavement period, but even years after the enslavement period and after Reconstruction, Blacks were still put on this social rung that said, 'You are still and will always remain the lowest of the low, the lowest class, and you still don't have the privilege to eat with us.' Many whites would throw away their dishes if they knew that a Black person used it.

The preceding discussion was prompted by Sis. Shabazz asking students a single question--what was happening contextually that would require Blacks to remove themselves from whites' presence? Sis. Shabazz was not content with the initial responses she received in which students blamed segregation or that perhaps whites felt ashamed about having Black friends. Rather, Sis. Shabazz wanted her students to know that whites perceived Blacks as inferior. When Nate replied that this belief stemmed from slavery, Sis. Shabazz enthusiastically validated his response and then explicitly told the class to "remember" that even after slavery Blacks were considered "the lowest of the low"; that even though whites were also immigrants, whites thought only they had the privilege of calling themselves Americans.

This poem could have been interpreted any number of ways. For example, the line Sis. Shabazz and her students dissected together--"They send me in the kitchen / When company comes / But I laugh / And eat well / And grow strong"--speaks to the mistreatment of Blacks but could also have been used as an example of Blacks' determination and optimism. It was clear, however, that Sis. Shabazz wanted her students to know Blacks were degraded and looked down upon even after slavery was abolished. To be fair, Sis. Shabazz also asked the class to also identify some of the contributions Africans made according to the second poem, *The Negro*

Speaks of Rivers, through which they talked about the significance of rivers and the building of pyramids. Overall, however, Sis. Shabazz spent more time remembering that Blacks were regarded as second-class citizens.

Another example of how Sis. Shabazz privileged the memory of Blacks' hardships comes from a lesson Sis. Shabazz taught on the Civil Rights Movement in the American history class. This took place in January following a field trip to watch the movie *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014). It was unclear if all the students at Kuumba went to see the movie; nonetheless, both of the 10th grade sections went, one of which I observed for this study. In class the following week, Sis. Shabazz showed a documentary on the Civil Rights Movement titled, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (Hampton, 2010). Sis. Shabazz's goal in having the class view the documentary was for them to know about the individuals and organizations involved in the movement that were not acknowledged in *Selma* (Fieldnotes, January 20, 2015). Sis. Shabazz distributed two handouts for this lesson. One was titled, "Ten Things to Know About Selma Before You See the Film" (Crosby, 2015) and the other was a double-sided handout with questions for students to answer as they watched the documentary. In all of my observations, I never saw Sis. Shabazz show a film without stopping it multiple times to narrate particular scenes or to discuss the questions on their handout, and this day was no exception.

As the documentary played, Sis. Shabazz paused the documentary numerous times to discuss the challenges that prompted the Civil Rights Movement. This included talking about "what was happening that was so dangerous" that would cause Blacks to exhibit courage "just to register" to vote and why whites were "so hostile" toward Black people during this time. At one point, Sis. Shabazz asked the class which amendment allowed everyone the right to vote. Several

students began calling out different answers until one student said the 14th amendment, which Sis. Shabazz said was correct (in actuality, this was the 15th amendment). She described the 15th amendment as follows:

The (15th) amendment to the constitution gives Black *men* the right to vote. It did not give Black *women* the right to vote. Women did not have the right to vote until 1919...and white women have never been restricted the right to vote once they were given the right to vote. There were *never* these barriers put in place that would then restrict them from the right to vote, [it] did not happen. But for black *women*, that's not the case, right?

In the preceding excerpt, Sis. Shabazz directs students' attention to the shortcomings of the 14th (read 15th) amendment rather than how it benefitted the Black community. Sis. Shabazz could have elected not to elaborate on this amendment at all. If Sis. Shabazz was truly only interested in seeing if students knew which amendment gave everyone the right to vote, she could have ended the discussion when she heard the right answer. I cannot be sure of Sis. Shabazz's actual intent for asking this question; however, the fact remains that she prioritized telling students that the (15th) amendment gave Black men the right to vote--on paper, at least--to the exclusion of Black women. To show just how unjust voting laws were for Blacks generally and Black women in particular, Sis. Shabazz added that unlike Black women, white women were never denied suffrage once they were granted this right. In making this juxtaposition, Sis. Shabazz acknowledged that white women were also once restricted from voting, but she noticeably failed to elaborate on the shared experiences of Black and white women. Instead Sis. Shabazz emphasized that Black women faced greater obstacles, which was part and parcel of a larger theme that portrayed the historical Black experience as inextricably linked with trials and tribulations.

Sis. Shabazz further privileged the memory of Blacks' hardships as they read the book *When and Where I Enter* (Giddings, 1984) for the American history class. Sis. Shabazz was introduced to this book in graduate school while pursuing her Master's degree in African American Studies and was asked by the principal to use the text at Kuumba when she began teaching history there (Interview, June 16, 2015). Although the principal recommended the text, Sis. Shabazz maintained that the principal had very little influence over how she used the books in her courses: "[The principal] definitely identified the texts that I was to teach, but the actual questions and methodology or activities, the lesson units...I created all of those" (Interview, June 30, 2015). When introducing the book to students, Sis. Shabazz said they were focusing on women's experiences because men typically receive much of the attention. For each of the first three chapters they read as a class, Sis. Shabazz created packets to give to students that contained critical comprehension questions along with a corresponding essay question.

In one of the lessons for *When and Where I Enter* (hereafter, *WWIE*), Sis. Shabazz once again used the historical treatment of Black and white women to recount the ways in which Blacks' experiences with adversity exceeded those of other groups, namely whites. The class began with students standing by their desks while Sis. Shabazz gave her usual pre-greeting announcements, which today included a brief lecture about not turning in their homework and reviewing their assignment for that evening (Fieldnotes, February, 9, 2015). When Sis. Shabazz finished addressing the class, the students proceeded to greet Sis. Shabazz and I. "Hotep Sis. Shabazz and Sis. Lina!" students exclaimed in unison. "Shimotep" replied Sis. Shabazz, after which students took their seats. They would soon begin reading the second chapter of *WWIE* which, remarked Sis. Shabazz, examined the treatment of women primarily during

Reconstruction and into the Industrial Revolution. To start, Sis. Shabazz wanted them to skim through the chapter and identify examples of ways Black and white women were treated and the differences between the two using one of the handouts she distributed to them. The class worked silently on their task while jazz played softly from Sis. Shabazz's computer in the back of the room. After about 15 minutes, Sis. Shabazz asked for volunteers to share their responses.

Rashida raised her hand and directed the class to page 35 where Black women were described by Englishmen as "hot constitutioned ladies," "lusty," and that they were essentially used for sex. Sis. Shabazz wrote Rashida's response on the board and paraphrased her response. Rashida followed up by providing an example of the way white women were treated. "So in comparison to Black women--so Black women were described as these lustful...sexual beings, right?" Sis. Shabazz said. "And in comparison, white women were described as what?" Just as Sis. Shabazz was about to restate Rashida's example for white women, Brian interjected and directed their attention to a different section in the book. He found an excerpt where it stated women were regarded as "whores, mistresses or wives." To this, Sis. Shabazz replied, "Both white and black women?" There was some confusion over this, so they referred back to the text and agreed it was a generalization for all women. Rashida, however, then redirected the class back to page 35 and pointed out that while Black women were degraded, white women were elevated. "So you're saying that white women on some level were *elevated*," Sis. Shabazz said. "So even though [white women] were considered whores, mistresses and wives...[white women are] going to be elevated a little bit more [and] to be the housewives that take care of and *civilize* the white *man*. Right?" Sis. Shabazz concluded this lesson by telling students they would read if Black women were ever elevated in a similar fashion as white women were.

They revisited the idea that white women were treated better than Black women the next day when Sis. Shabazz asked if anyone had “a burning desire” to talk about anything they read from Chapter 2 so far. Jordan shot her hand in the air and said she had “a bone to pick” (Fieldnotes, February 20, 2015). Jordan felt “some type of way” about one of the questions in their packet that asked what punishments white women received if they were caught engaging in sexual acts with white men.

Jordan: [Are they] saying that white women, they were considered workers but the way they were treated, is different from the way Black people were treated? Because if a Black women had sex with a white man they would be uh, what it did it say, they would be taken from, oh, they said they were subjected to two additional years of service. They said that they were to be sold to the church wardens....

Sis. Shabazz: And then [earlier] you said the men went unpunished.

Jordan: Yeah, the men weren't punished at all.

Sis. Shabazz: So do you have a question or some type of conclusion? Like how has all of what you have read, the treatment of Black women compared to white women, how has that made you feel...

Jordan: Even though the white women were doing the same things as the Black women in terms of having sexual intercourse with white men, I don't like the fact that [the] consequences white women had were not the same consequences that Black women had.

In the foregoing exchange, students presented examples of how Black and white women were both mistreated. In the first lesson, Brian found a passage in the book that stated women were generally considered “whores, mistresses or wives” and in the second, Jordan recounted how white women were punished for having sex with white men, albeit less severely than Black women. Yet in both cases, Sis. Shabazz only elaborated on how white women were treated better than Black women. Sis. Shabazz could have used her students' examples to impart that all

women were repressed historically in some way. In fact, this was the direction I initially thought Sis. Shabazz was going in when she asked the class to identify examples of how Black and white women were treated during Reconstruction and the Industrial Revolution. In the discussions that ensued, however, it appeared Sis. Shabazz was more concerned with students knowing that Black women's experiences were more trying than it was for white women. In the end, Sis. Shabazz made Black women's struggles more salient while downplaying the hardships of white women.

In sum, the notion of struggle was a prominent feature in Sis. Shabazz's portrayal of African American history. Furthermore, she explicated both explicit and implicit, or hidden, forms of racism and incorporated multiple viewpoints (e.g., men, women and children). In the next section, I will discuss how the notion of resistance emerged as another dominant theme in Sis. Shabazz's representation of Black history.

Resistance

In addition to foregrounding Blacks' struggles, Sis. Shabazz consistently recounted the ways Blacks resisted their oppression. Moreover, she underscored the efforts of the collective over any one individual. An example of this is her presentation of the Civil Rights Movement. Sis. Shabazz may have depicted the Civil Rights Movement as a tenuous time for Black people--especially in regards to securing voting rights--but she also emphasized the agency that existed within the Black community. As I discussed in the preceding section, Sis. Shabazz presented a lesson on the Civil Rights Movement in which students watched and compared a documentary about the Civil Rights Movement to what they saw in the movie, *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014). (Fieldnotes, January, 20, 2015). As she often did, Sis. Shabazz created a movie guide with

several questions for students to answer as they watched the documentary and stopped the film frequently to review them as a class. For the first two questions, students were asked to consider what was so dangerous that would cause Black people to have to exhibit courage just to register to vote and “why whites were so *hostile* toward groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” respectively. Sis. Shabazz made sure the class understood these two questions but did not spend time discussing them, for it was the third question that she wanted to focus on most. For this question, Sis. Shabazz wanted her students to understand why there was a division in leadership between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

What appeared to be a seemingly straightforward question turned into a 35 discussion resembling a town hall meeting. Students chimed in with different responses while Sis. Shabazz probed and elaborated on students’ answers along the way. It was the way in which Sis. Shabazz facilitated this discussion, though, that revealed what she really wanted students to take away from the question about conflicts in leadership. For virtually every response students gave, Sis. Shabazz kept asking the same question in return--what is the problem with any one person being the face of the movement? Sis. Shabazz refused to relent until she got the answer she was looking for. This came from Rashida.

Rashida: Um, [it is a problem for any movement to identify one person as its leader] because when people will think of the movement, and they think of that one person, they’re not thinking about all the other people that *died* or just made sacrifices and went through hard times who also contributed to the movement. The credit is just going to that one leader.

Sis. Shabazz: Okay, sure and that’s what [the person from the documentary] is talking about. He’s saying this movement was a great movement *long* before Dr. King came [her voice starts to rise]. We’ve been doing this work long before he came, so it’s not just about *him*...[T]he movement has to live beyond us, beyond

our bodies or behind one person. So if Dr. King dies or if Rev. C.T. Vivian dies? What happens to the movement if that person dies?

[Two students say the movement dies with them]

Sis. Shabazz: It dies with them right? Not because the movement wasn't strong, but because the movement only focused on that one individual, that one character and if they die, *does* the movement die with them? No! We still have problems, we still can't vote. So what are we gonna do? Are we all gonna just cry and be upset because this person is gone [a male student says 'no']? No! Because it's bigger than that one person. That was the division in the leadership.

The dialogue above arose after Sis. Shabazz said she wanted to focus on the third question on students' handout, which centered on the division in leadership between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Sis. Shabazz's facilitation of this discussion revealed, however, that she was less concerned about the source of this conflict than in students internalizing that the Movement was a collective effort. To be sure, moments before the preceding interaction took place, Sis. Shabazz agreed with Brian's assertion that King's presence "did not [let] the people be the movement." That Sis. Shabazz continued to interrogate this question even after receiving the "correct" answer shows there was something else she wanted to impart to students. Ultimately, Sis. Shabazz wanted students to recall that the Movement was initiated and sustained by numerous, often forgotten individuals and, as she emphatically stated, it was "a great movement *long* before Dr. King came." Rather than simply tell students this, she guided students into drawing this conclusion by continuously asking why it is problematic to attribute a movement to a single individual; in this case, Dr. King. Through this, Sis. Shabazz impressed upon students that not only was the Movement led by the community but that this necessary in order for the movement to continue on. In short, asking what led to a divide between SNCC and the SCLC served as a proxy to

enshrine the memory of Blacks' collective agency rather than attributing the Movement to select individuals.

While Sis. Shabazz placed great emphasis on the work of the community, she portrayed Black women as playing an especially significant role in the fight for social justice. Sis. Shabazz imparted this message primarily through their reading of the book *When and Where I Enter* (Giddings, 1984). For every chapter Sis. Shabazz assigned students to read, she created critical comprehension questions and an accompanying essay prompt. All of the prompts placed Black women at the center of acts of resistance. In one class, for example, Sis. Shabazz posited that we would not know as much as we do about lynching if it were not for the efforts of Ida B. Wells and had students identify other African American female activists as well as Black women organizations that led the charge for social change (Fieldnotes February 10, 2015). It was through Sis. Shabazz's written responses to her own essay questions, though, that she made the memory of Black female activism a key feature within the larger theme of Black resistance.

An example of this is when Sis. Shabazz assigned students an essay prompt for the first chapter of *When and Where I Enter* (Giddings, 1984), "To Sell My Life as Dearly as Possible." For each prompt Sis. Shabazz assigned, she wrote her own response so students had a model to work from. In this particular lesson, Sis. Shabazz reminded students that they are looking at the impact of Black women "and how they have helped address freedom, justice and peace within their community" (Fieldnotes, February 11, 2010). Their job, Sis. Shabazz told them, was to think critically about the information they are learning: "You are saying what is wrong with society back then, what is wrong with society today and how does that relate to your understanding this text and moving forward in your life with that understanding and make your

communities better.” Before having them begin, she read them an essay she wrote to the prompt: “How did Ida B. Wells use lynching as a stepping stone to demand justice within unjust communities?”. Sis. Shabazz concluded her essay with the following remarks about Wells:

Her work and commitment to this life’s mission has given her the honor of being one of history’s most remarkable women. Ultimately, Wells’s work spearheaded the voice and determination for women activists to finally stand up against the traditional societal thoughts of Black men and women and the way they would be viewed in the future. Through this wisdom and understanding of Well’s life, we must be challenged to evaluate the images of the Black man and woman we have allowed to be exemplified in the media. It is our duty to reclaim her legacy and reclaim an image of Blackness that we can once again fight for and celebrate its honor.

In this excerpt, Sis. Shabazz makes several claims about Wells and, by extension, Black women. First, Sis. Shabazz states that Wells is one of the most remarkable women in history. Second, she attributes Wells with inspiring other female activists to “finally stand up against” traditional societal views of Black men and women. Third, Sis. Shabazz maintained that Wells left a legacy of which it is “our duty to reclaim.” This was just one of many instances in which Sis. Shabazz highlighted the work and determination of Black women throughout American history, the influence of which was evident in my interviews with student participants. Elena, for example, said she enjoyed learning that Black women did not “just stay home, cook and clean” but actually “did do things” (Interview, May 4, 2015). Similarly, Simone told me “[*When and Where I Enter*] talked about how strong women were, or how strong women are, and how, if you’re determined, anything is possible” (Interview, Month, date, year). It was not just the girls that were impacted. Like Elena and Simone, Ezekiel also appreciated learning more about the role of Black women in Sis. Shabazz’s classes. For him, though, what stood out was not Black women’s achievements but the hardships they endured: “I thought Black women and Black men were

equal in that time period but Black men were more superior than women, as in the woman was always treated as downgraded” (Interview, June 4, 2015). The students’ comments not only demonstrate the ways in which Sis. Shabazz underscored the work and resilience of Black women in the larger fight for justice and equality but also how she helped make the memory of Black women accessible for students.

The excerpts I have presented and analyzed thus far have reflected more traditional forms of resistance in that they have involved protesting, marching and raising awareness of pressing issues. However, Sis. Shabazz also taught her students that sometimes resistance appeared in unconventional ways that at times had severe repercussions for Blacks’ emotional and psychological well-being. Sis. Shabazz addressed these issues while presenting an essay she wrote for Chapter 2 of *When and Where I Enter* (Giddings, 1994). The question students were to answer was, “How did the treatment of Black women during the period of enslavement challenge the concepts of moral idea, inspire resistance, and ultimately lead to the dismantling of the slavery system?” (Fieldnotes, February 26, 2015). As she read her essay, Sis. Shabazz had students mark their copy for main ideas, places where she incorporated evidence from the text, underlining personal connections she made, and noting where Sis. Shabazz made a challenge to society. Essentially, they were all the things Sis. Shabazz wanted students do have in their own responses to the prompt. The students were silent as Sis. Shabazz talked about “the models of resistance and determination expressed by African women against the unjust nature of chattel slavery and the rape of Black women,” how “resistance came at a strong cost for Black women,” and how Black women today “still struggle with the same issues as our ancestors.” Upon concluding her essay, I heard some of the students call out “ashe” (pronounced “ah-shay”), a

term students often used when Sis. Shabazz or one of their peers said something that resonated with them. This was also part of the school's culture.

After Sis. Shabazz finished reading her essay, she had them share the annotations they made beginning with the main ideas they identified. A student raised her hand and alluded to a passage from Sis. Shabazz's essay:

Although courageous, resistance came at a strong cost to the Black woman's psyche and ability to nurture her family in the traditional way. As a result of Black women's tenacious will and commitment to raising a strong family, many of these forms of resistance came at a cost. Take for example a Black woman who resists the sexual advances of her slave owner by commitment infanticide or forcibly inducing an abortion by digesting poisonous herbs. I can only imagine the pain, loneliness and despair a woman was forced to endure and live through these choices.

Upon the student reading this passage, Sis. Shabazz asked if she knew the meaning of *infanticide*. Seeing that she did not, Sis. Shabazz said it meant "killing babies" and used the movie adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Demme, 1998) to describe how women committed infanticide as a form of resistance during slavery. The context of the story *Beloved*, Sis. Shabazz explained, is that the female protagonist escaped from slavery and traveled North where she created a new home with her family and children. However one fateful night, Sis. Shabazz continued, the protagonist made the painstaking decision to kill her children when she learned she was being pursued by slave captors:

At some point, [the woman knows] the slave owner is going to start looking at her baby and try to rape her or take her innocence. So she hears the slave owners coming and she *bashes* her infant's head against the wall [students gasp]. The other baby, she slit her throat because as a mother, she had to decide, am I going to let my babies go through rape when that slave owner decides it's time to take their innocence? Am I going to let that happen or am I going to keep my children's innocence and commit my own sin by killing them now and saving their souls from this horrible experience of slavery? That was the decision many women had to take and chose to do.

Above, Sis. Shabazz frames infanticide as a form of resistance employed by Black women during slavery. In narrating this scene from *Beloved*, Sis. Shabazz tells students that the protagonist made the conscious decision to kill her children rather than allow them to be taken by slave captors who will inevitably rape them. According to Sis. Shabazz, the mother made this choice in an attempt to save her children “from this horrible experience of slavery.” By interpreting the scene in this manner, Sis. Shabazz depicts the protagonist as someone who acted thoughtfully and deliberately as opposed to someone who reacted out of sheer panic. Certainly, Sis. Shabazz could also have used this scene to illustrate the traumatic experiences Black women experienced during slavery. Had she stopped there, however, the element of resistance would have been lost. In composing her essay, Sis. Shabazz intentionally used infanticide as an example of how “although courageous, resistance came at a strong cost to Black women’s psyche.” Thus, Sis. Shabazz depicted the act of a mother killing her children as as a painful, yet brave act of defiance. On one level, Sis. Shabazz characterized Black women as being instrumental in dismantling the system of slavery. On a broader scale, she conveyed that Blacks exercised various modes of resistance and that the decision to challenge their oppression was not always an easy one to make.

In emphasizing theme of resistance, Sis. Shabazz underscored the efforts of the collective over any the individual. She also depicted Black women as playing an especially significant role in the fight for social justice and showed that resistance had severe repercussions for Blacks’ emotional and psychological well-being. In the last section, I will discuss how the preceding two themes--injustice and resistance--merged together to create the third and final prominent theme in Sis. Shabazz’s historical narrative.

The Struggle Continues--A Call to Action

In the first two sections of this chapter, I analyzed the ways in which Sis. Shabazz portrayed Blacks as an oppressed group but also that people of African ancestry used various means of resistance. Both themes aligned with Sis. Shabazz's personal conception of the Black past: "I've always tried to, I think, start off a story with saying, this is who these group of people were," Sis. Shabazz reflected in an interview. "This is their ancient past" (Interview, June 30, 2015). As to the nature of this past, Sis. Shabazz wanted students to know what Blacks have had to struggle through. There was another layer to this narrative, however, that Sis. Shabazz hoped to impart through her teaching. As she reflected more deeply about the story she strived to convey through the African American and American history classes, Sis. Shabazz hoped students would understand "what was their struggle and then where are they now and *why* are they where they are now and how can we do something about that." In doing so, Sis. Shabazz sought to encourage her students to engage in social action which, she asserted, could only happen when children decide what issues are important to address. "But," she added, "you as the teacher have to drive that vision." Indeed, the third and final prominent theme that emerged in my analysis of Sis. Shabazz's representation of Black history is what I refer to as *the struggle continues--a call to action*. Through teaching about the historical Black experience--specifically that Blacks faced tremendous obstacles and fought courageously to overcome them--Sis. Shabazz routinely talked about the ways this experience is still relevant today. In what follows, I will present and analyze examples of how Sis. Shabazz used the memory of Blacks' past struggles to raise students' awareness of issues impacting today's Black community and both encourage and inform students' role in affecting change.

Sis. Shabazz helped students to make these connections in class one day when talking about Blacks' experiences during slavery and Reconstruction. The objective for this lesson was for students to begin brainstorming for an essay they had to write for the second chapter of *When and Where I Enter* (Giddings, 1984): "How did the treatment of Black women during the period of enslavement challenge the concepts of moral idea, inspire resistance, and ultimately lead to the dismantling of the slavery system?" (Artifact, February 26, 2015). As I have discussed elsewhere, Sis. Shabazz almost always wrote a response to her own prompts so students could use it as a guide while writing their own. The same was true in this case. Sis. Shabazz provided them with copies of her essay in the previous day's class and wanted to review it when they today. As she read her essay aloud, Sis. Shabazz instructed students to mark their copy for four items per the grading rubric: main ideas, evidence she pulled from the book, connections she made to herself, and her challenge to society. Sis. Shabazz proceeded to read her essay without interruption, during which I observed only one student not looking at his handout. When she was finished, Sis. Shabazz gave students five additional minutes to complete their annotations before they discussed them as a whole class (Fieldnotes, February 26, 2015).

In the discussion that ensued, Sis. Shabazz recounted the trauma that had been inflicted upon Black people during slavery and Reconstruction to draw students' attention to the challenges confronting them in the present. It began with Sis. Shabazz giving graphic details about infanticide and how this was used as a form of resistance among enslaved Black women. "The deep part is," Sis. Shabazz concluded, "this is [over] 150-200 years ago. Imagine those same issues happen in our society and communities today." Many of the students were perplexed by Sis. Shabazz's assertion. "Today?" Rashida exclaimed. "Today!" Sis. Shabazz replied

emphatically. She proceeded to talk about women, some as young as they are, who abort their children because they had a child with someone they did not love or did not love them. Sis. Shabazz focused on the men next. She reminded students of previous discussions they have had about lynching and asked them to consider how the lynching of Black men impacted the family unit. She spoke of children being without their fathers, women having to see their husbands “*destroyed*” and raise the children on their own, and young boys not having anyone to teach them how to be a man. Moreover, Sis. Shabazz emphasized that these issues remain prevalent today: “That’s why this [essay] question is *so* significant and important because 200 *years* ago this was an issue,” Sis. Shabazz asserted. “But we still see the remnants of these problems *today*. They still *affect* our communities today.” Here, Sis. Shabazz tells students that they can see the effects of lynching on their communities from two centuries ago. Students like Rashida did not readily see this on our own, prompting Sis. Shabazz to give examples they could relate to such as women having to be single mothers and young boys not having strong male figures in their lives. Indeed, at one point a female student turn to another and said, “You feel this?!” which suggests that this resonated with her somehow. Sis. Shabazz had one more message she wanted to get across to students--that students must take decisive action against the problems impacting their community. Sis. Shabazz asked students to identify the personal connections she made. A student rose her hand and read an excerpt from Sis. Shabazz’s essay.

Student 1 [reading excerpt from Sis. Shabazz’s essay]: We will always suffer from these same problems of our mothers’ past. It is time for women all over the global to spiritually heal and ask for forgiveness for not respecting the true power of our womanhood, the womb. Ashe!

Sis. Shabazz: Okay. And so there I’m giving my personal connection, but I’m also giving my what? [Several students start calling out a response.]

Student 2: Your challenge to society.

Sis. Shabazz: My challenge to society! I'm challenging society to say no, we must do this. We *got* to! We don't have no other choice! If we gonna save our families and save our society, our communities. We gotta do something about it. And so that's where I'm giving a part of my challenge to society.

In the preceding, Sis. Shabazz affirmed that the excerpt read by the student constituted one of Sis. Shabazz's personal connections. Rather than expounding on this, however, she framed it as a call to action. The excerpt was about women needing to heal and ask for forgiveness; yet, Sis. Shabazz used this excerpt to convince students how "we gotta do something about [these problems]." Through her facilitation of this discussion, Sis. Shabazz drew from the memory of Blacks' hardships to inform students that the Black community still suffers from the effects of slavery and Reconstruction and that it is incumbent upon them to address these issues.

Sis. Shabazz made these similar connections throughout the year including when she had students watch *The Butler* (Daniels, 2013). Her goal was for students to view the film through a "historical lens" (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2015). Specifically, she wanted students to understand the sharecropping system and the challenges of the Great Depression as well as other major time periods they had been learning about in class (e.g., the Jim Crow South and the Great Migration). To meet these objectives, Sis. Shabazz created a handout with a series of questions for students to answer as they watched the film, so they would think critically about what they were seeing. At various points, Sis. Shabazz would also stop the film to narrate scenes, address students' inquiries and review items from their handout.

Throughout the four days they spent watching the film, Sis. Shabazz connected the memory of Blacks' historical struggles to the experiences of Black people today and to students themselves. In one class, for example, Sis. Shabazz suggested that students recall how their

ancestors effected change to inform how students respond to present-day injustice. It was their second day of watching the movie and Sis. Shabazz wanted to know what students thought about the interactions between the main character--the butler--and his son (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2015). The two characters had a contentious relationship largely due to the fact that the son, unlike his father, refused to act subservient toward whites. Some of the students in the class were critical of the father, including one female student who accused him of acting like a “house nigga,” a phrase she heard in the movie. Conversely, she praised the son for wanting to “fight for his rights and for other African Americans.” Another female student agreed, citing that the father had “the mindset of a slave” because “he obeys the white man” while the son does not. Upon listening to students’ critique of the father, Sis. Shabazz posed a new question--should one choose to survive and “cope through the challenges” or use their voice and “take risks?” Although Sis. Shabazz was asking students to consider which decision was most wise--surviving or taking risks--some students questioned if the father’s actions (or the lack thereof) was actually a choice. For instance, when Simone suggested that the father’s perceived subservience was intentional, a male student vigorously refuted this claim and countered that the father was just doing what he was taught to do (read: trained). Jordan, meanwhile, found it difficult to comprehend how one could not react when provoked: “If you left that up to me I couldn’t do the whole get spit in the face thing. I *could* do the protesting though, but the spittin in the face, I couldn’t do that.” In response to students’ comments, Sis. Shabazz reinforced the notion that their ancestors acted with purpose and encouraged her students to do the same:

A lot of people will look at the Black Panther Party, and they will say you know they were this militant *violent* group of people, that yeah I would have wanted to be a part of them. But the Black Panthers *also* went through serious training... [Y]ou also have to be very disciplined in a protest to say I’m *not* going to move,

right? No matter if you spit at me, no matter if you punch me, no matter if you come *at* me with a *water* hose, I'm *not* going to *move*. Like you can't control me, right? You can't *determine* my destiny. And many of you all do that even today [when challenging your teachers in class]. So many of you have that energy [to protest]. But many of you what you *don't* do is you don't take the lessons of our ancestors and look at strategy and think of and consider, well how can I--if I believe that something unjust is happening here, and that *I* am in the right, what is my strategy? What steps am I going to take to then address this injustice that is in front of me?

Above, Sis. Shabazz encouraged students to draw from the memory of their ancestors to inform how they respond to obstacles they encounter in the present. This was prompted by Sis. Shabazz asking students what they thought about the interactions between the butler and his son. As students shared out, tension emerged in the way Sis. Shabazz and students remembered, or portrayed, the butler's actions--or lack thereof--when faced with injustice. While Sis. Shabazz framed the butler's conduct as deliberate, some of the students attributed this to his upbringing or a sense of weakness. In response, Sis. Shabazz reminded students that their ancestors exercised both passive and active forms of resistance and that both required training and careful thought. She then encouraged her students to use this memory to inform how they respond to obstacles today. Specifically, Sis. Shabazz tell students that they should take the lessons of their ancestors and come up with a strategy when they believe something to be unjust.

In this same lesson, Sis. Shabazz provided examples of how to act strategically by raising students' awareness of issues that merit their attention as well as those that do not. She recently heard of a student petition made against a teacher in the school and told them that while she loves when young people show this type of initiative, they should "raise all kinds of *drama* for something that *matters*" (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2015). Rather than retaliating against a teacher who "demands excellence of them" but may not deliver this in a way students approve of, Sis.

Shabazz encouraged them to complain against issues such as how convicts are released from prison or what resources they have access to from within the system. “That’s something that’s *real*,” Sis. Shabazz asserted. She reiterated this argument 20 minutes later when the topic of *Brown versus the Board of Education* came up while talking about a scene from the movie. She expressed that although their ancestors fought for integrated schools, there are still schools that are comprised primarily of Black students. Hearing students’ shock--including one student who asked if this was legal--Sis. Shabazz explained how policies such as special admissions have contributed to segregated schools and suggested this was an issue students should take action against:

If it’s supposed to be a *public* school, *anybody* should be able to go to that school that lives in that *area* [her voice starts to rise]. The majority of the children that live [where two local special admissions school are located] are Black people! But they’re *not* in that school because [they’re] specially *select* schools. But again, that’s a *way*, that’s a *policy* that is created to then keep you out of certain schools and still keeping certain schools very segregated, and only having certain groups of students being able to go to certain schools. Now is that fair? [Jordan calls out ‘nope’]. I don’t know, it’s a conversation, something to think about. And it’s something that *again*, instead of maybe creating petitions around your *teachers* that you don’t like [she starts to speak slowly causing students to chuckle], create a petition around the *schools* in this *city* and the inequalities of the school *system*.

In the preceding, Sis. Shabazz proposed that students work to challenge the existence of segregated schools. To do this, Sis. Shabazz first had to make students aware that this was even an issue. While talking to students about *Brown versus The Board of Education*, Sis. Shabazz commented that schools continue to be segregated by race. I did not get the impression that this was a topic Sis. Shabazz planned to expound upon, for it was not until students expressed disbelief that she explained how this occurs. Sis. Shabazz instructed students that one of the ways schools have remained segregated is through policies such as special admissions

requirements. She told students that while assigning students to schools based on race is technically illegal, policies that allow schools to be selective in who they enroll keep many Black students out of those schools. In this way, Sis. Shabazz conveyed that historical forms of racism remain prevalent but in more discrete ways. After raising students' awareness of this issue, Sis. Shabazz then presents how this relates to students. She reiterates that instead of making petitions against teachers they do not like, students should focus their energy into more important matters; in this case, segregated schools.

Sis. Shabazz continued to emphasize the relevance of the struggles depicted in *The Butler* (Daniels, 2013) through the end of the film. On their fourth day watching the movie, Sis. Shabazz asked students to share how it has been for them to view *Butler* from a historical perspective (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2015). As the conversation unfolded, however, Sis. Shabazz shifted the focus from student reactions to recounting how young people have historically demanded justice for their communities and then connecting this to students. The turning point in the discussion was when a male student said he noticed the butler's son influenced him to be more assertive: "When he found out his son was a part of the Black Panthers and the freedom rides, it made [the butler] stand up to the President and ask for a higher salary". Sis. Shabazz cited this as evidence of how elders sometimes see the strength young people possess and then asked the class to consider what can deter elders from protesting and consequently "why it's important for the youth to stand up." She agreed with two students who suggested that fear plays a part. Simone, for example, believed it was "scary" for the butler to "rebel against what he's already accustomed to" and another student reflected that elders did not want to risk putting themselves and their families in danger. In affirming the latter, Sis. Shabazz remarked that if she

lost her job as a result of joining a rebellion, she would also be hurting her husband and children. After positing that elders in the past had similar concerns, Sis. Shabazz recalled a scene from the film in which the butler's son says he "might as well be dead" if he cannot eat or ride the bus where he wants to. "This is *slavery*," Sis. Shabazz said emphatically. "This is injustice right *now*. I can't *live* like this. I *won't* live like this and so I *must* do something and so that's what he does." Following her reenactment of this scene, Sis. Shabazz asked students how this applies to them:

Now again, I always try to bring this back to present day. How does this relate to us today? Young people today, what are you fighting for?! What are *you* standing up for? What injustice have you decided that I can't live with this still going on in existence? If there is an injustice going on, what am i going to *do*? Are young people protesting today? Are young people standing up and using their voices today? [Some students say 'no']. Are young people *fighting* this same similar fight? *Or* have we decided that we're going to fall back and be *complacent* with the injustice of education [student says 'ashe'] and the ways that we are being educated and not saying anything? Are we complicit with or complacent with that?

Here, Sis. Shabazz once again reinforced the relationship between Blacks' historical struggles, the contemporary Black experience and what this means for students. Sis. Shabazz initially wanted to know students' experiences watching *The Butler* from a historical lens. This changed, however, when a student observed that the butler's son emboldened him to approach the President for a higher wage. Sis. Shabazz used the student's comment to then impart that fear made many elders reluctant to rebel and is why "it's important for the youth to stand up." To support her argument, Sis. Shabazz reenacted a scene from the movie where the butler's son declares he cannot and will not sit idly by in the face of injustice. Next, Sis. Shabazz explicitly told students her goal is to always have them think about how this is relevant to them. Specifically, Sis. Shabazz asks students what *they* are fighting for. Thus, just as she did when

exhorting students to protest against the treatment of convicts and segregated schools, Sis. Shabazz framed the present as an ongoing struggle.

Conclusion

In sum, Sis. Shabazz represented African American history as a *continuity narrative*. This consisted of three prominent themes. The first of these was *oppression*, in which Sis. Shabazz explicated both explicit and implicit forms of racial oppression that Blacks endured throughout history and incorporated the experiences of men, women and children. At the same time, Sis. Shabazz emphasized notions of *resistance*. In doing so, Sis. Shabazz underscored the efforts of the collective group over the individual. In addition, she depicted Black women as playing an especially important role in uplifting the Black community and showed that resistance has had severe repercussions for Blacks' emotional and psychological well-being. In the last section, I discussed how Sis. Shabazz built on these first two themes to encourage students to challenge injustices in present day. I thus refer to the final theme as *the struggle continues--a call to action* because in the process of promoting social activism, Sis. Shabazz historicized contemporary issues impacting the Black community--e.g., mass incarceration, mental illness and segregation--as a way to impress upon students that the struggle for freedom is as relevant today as it was in the past.

In the next chapter, I will present my findings for Kuumba student participants' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience and discuss the ways in which their understandings were shaped by Sis. Shabazz's historical narrative.

CHAPTER 5

KUUMBA STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK EXPERIENCE

I remember they were killing them off, killing the ones that they couldn't take over. - Brenda

They were determined, they were warriors, and this is who I am! - Simone

Today I think that we're back at square one - Brenda

What's our direction now? - Nate

In this chapter I present findings from the nine students who participated in this study. Of the 25 students enrolled in the section I observed, a total of ten gave assent, which included getting permission from their parents who signed separate consent forms. I had hoped that at least half the number of students in the class would agree to participate, but in practice students kept forgetting to return their forms or simply did not express interest. Among the ten students who agreed to be a part of this study, three were male and seven were female. One of the participant's data was excluded from final analysis due to her inconsistent attendance in the class. It should be noted, though, that this was not by choice. Because Valerie was a designated English Language Learner (ELL), she was often pulled out of class to meet with her ELL instructor. Valerie resented this, but she unfortunately did not have a choice in the matter. The nine participants represented in this chapter by alphabetical order are Brenda, Brian, Elena, Ezekiel, Jordan, Natasha, Nate, Rashida and Simone.

My findings indicated that students' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience were influenced by Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history. In reflecting on what they learned in the African American and American history classes, the nine participants relied heavily on curricular materials and teacher and classroom discourse to help remember, or reconstruct, the historical Black experience. Students in turn used what they learned about African American history to draw conclusions about the present-day Black experience.

In all, four dominant themes emerged from the data, which I divided into two sections. In the first section, I present findings on students' conception of African American history and discuss how this corresponded with Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history--*enduring struggle and resistance and achievements*. In the subsequent section, I present two themes in students' understanding of the contemporary Black experience--*the struggle continues and solutions unclear*. Taken together, the participants presented African American history as *continuity narrative*, or a continuous struggle that continues to define the Black experience today. The fourth theme revealed, however, that while students were aware of prevailing challenges that continue to impact Black communities, they were less clear about what steps or strategies they could employ to effect change.

An important goal of this study was to avoid characterizing the students in the study as a monolithic group. Therefore as I discuss the four major themes, I also include the perspectives of students who diverged most from the group.

Students' Understanding of the Historical Black Experience

Enduring struggle. Kuumba student participants foremost portrayed Black history as one of struggle. For instance even when I asked students to share what they learned about Blacks' experiences prior to slavery, the majority explained that Africans were in the process of *becoming* slaves. Recalled Jordan, "I think basically before slavery it was just tryin' to build up the understanding like listen, y'all 'bout to go through hell and back so like y'all just need to get ready for it" (Interview, May 4, 2015). Similarly, Brenda recalled that Africans were slain and taken from their homeland: "They were trying to take them from their homeland to their boats...I remember they were killing them off, killing the ones that they couldn't take over" (Interview, April 23, 2015). I was usually able to decipher to whom students were referring when they used vague terms like "they" and "them" as Brenda did here. Nonetheless, I always asked students to clarify so I did not make any false assumptions. Without fail, students held whites culpable, as did Brenda: "Oh, the white people were killing--the Europeans were killing Africans off and taking the rest to the boat." Jordan and Brenda's conception of Black life prior to slavery are representative of what the majority of Kuumba students recalled about this time period in particular and history in general. In Jordan's words, Blacks had been "through hell and back," with whites being largely responsible for Blacks' oppression.

In an interview with Sis. Shabazz, I asked if she could offer any insight as to why the participants did not seem to remember much about Africa except for slavery. She informed me that she talked about ancient African toward the beginning of the school year but did not devote much time to this because it was not the primary focus of the African American and American history classes.

I teach World History, and I teach American history in 9th and 10th grades, so I don't believe in stepping outside of my content. If my children are supposed to learn this amount of information, I'm going to teach them this information (hits the table for emphasis). I don't believe we just gotta focus on ancient Africa all year long. I'm not going to do that to my children...I know there's information they have not been exposed to, but I also can't feel like I have to make up for all of that. I can't! (Interview, June 16, 2015)

A review of Sis. Shabazz's curricular materials supports her claim that she presented limited information about ancient Africa. One document she used to teach about this topic was a poem titled, "Challenge" (author unknown) which spoke of how Africans "use[d] to come together" and "build pyramids and points of light above deserts scorching sands." Sis. Shabazz also had the class read the poem "Ego Trippin'" by Nikki Giovanni (2002) to identify the contributions of classical Africa. Despite reading and talking about ancient Africa in class, however, the students I interviewed collectively forgot this information. One reason for this may be that these discussions occurred in the beginning of the school year. Thus, students may have been able to access this content had I met with them earlier in the year. Second, it is plausible I may have played a role. In my interviews with students, I asked what they remembered learning about the historical Black experience "pre-enslavement," "before slavery," and "before they were enslaved." I intentionally avoided using terms such as "ancient" and "African civilizations," as I did not want to inadvertently lead students into giving a particular response. In hindsight I cannot help but wonder if the participants would have spoken more favorably about Africa if I used wording that activated this knowledge. Even when considering this, however, students still characterized the overall Black experience as one long struggle.

Along with characterizing the historical Black experience as "a chronicle of horrors" (Patterson, 1971, p. 299), several participants recounted both explicit and implicit forms

of racism. A prime example is students' descriptions of the Jim Crow era. As a group, students portrayed this period as a continuation of slavery in which whites found more insidious ways of repressing Blacks. Nate's account of this period captures this trend:

We think that after they abolished slavery, Black people were free. Not really. That movie taught us about the Jim Crow South and how mass incarceration plagued African Americans then, and it showed us [the] predecessor of mass incarceration. People were able to accuse Black people of owing money and would take Blacks to mining camps, and they would just work them to death and then let them go free like nothing ever happened.

Here, Nate attributes his understanding of Jim Crow to what Sis. Shabazz taught them in class. For example, "that movie" Nate alluded to above was *Slavery by Another Name* (Pollard, 2012), a film students watched in class about how slavery persisted after the Civil War through peonage. In addition to this film, Sis. Shabazz took the class on a field trip to visit an exhibit on the parallels between the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and present day sweatshops; showed a documentary on sharecropping; and had students read portions of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander, 2010). By the end of the year, then, the students had been given a lot of information about the hardships Blacks faced during the Jim Crow era; more specifically, that racism and discrimination became gradually more invisible.

In addition to the above, Sis. Shabazz discussed the deleterious impact of sharecropping and peonage on Black communities as they watched Lee Daniel's *The Butler* (2013) in the American history class. Aware that some students may have already seen the movie, Sis. Shabazz told the class she wanted them to watch the film through "a historic eye" (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2015). To assist students in this task, Sis. Shabazz created a movie guide with a list of questions for them to answer as the movie played. She stopped the film to review the first few questions, one of which asked students to explain the Jim Crow system. Sis. Shabazz told the class that she

did not think it was necessary to devote much discussing this question because they have addressed this topic many times: “We’ve discussed it through the movie *Selma* at the very beginning of the year, when we discussed and talked about even the Black Power movement, [and] we’ve discussed it through the enslavement period. So we’ve discussed that over and over and over again.” Several minutes later, Sis. Shabazz directed the class’ attention to a timeline on the second page of their handout and asked them to describe the Jim Crow South. “What did [people] have to experience?” she asked. “What were the challenges that they went through according to what we see [in the film]?”.

Student 1: People couldn’t find jobs.

Sis. Shabazz: Right, *very* very difficult to find jobs, specifically for Black people. What else? What were other characteristics of the Jim Crow South?

Student 2: Unfair share cropping laws.

Sis. Shabazz: Unfair *laws* in general, but yes, absolutely. Unfair sharecropping system, which was definitely unjust. Everybody should be taking notes and writing down all these examples that we’re giving. Again, these types of things will be coming up on exams, when you’re asked to know these timeframes and identify characteristics of the time period. What’s another example?

Elena: Families being separated.

Sis. Shabazz: Families being forced to be separated, right? Or people *looking* for their long lost family that they may have lost during the enslavement period. [Sis. Shabazz calls on a third student who has his hand raised].

Student 4: Debt.

Sis. Shabazz: Debt, right? Absolutely because if you don’t *have* any money and somebody *gives* you some money or somebody *gives* you a job, on some level you’re indebted to that person, right? You owe them the fact that you didn’t have a job before, and now they gave you a job. You *owe* them. [Calls on another student]

Natasha: Um, psychological damage?

Sis. Shabazz: Psychological damage, absolutely. So give us some characteristics. Like where did psychological damage come from?

Ezekiel: Killings.

Sis. Shabazz: Observing killings! Observing lynchings, right? [Calls on another student]

Student 7: Rape.

Sis. Shabazz: Right, rape. And having *no* one to then, like, not being able to go to the doctor. Not being able to go and get an abortion if you need to because you want to get that horrible experience out of your life. No! You still have to give birth to that baby, that baby becomes a part of your life and your experience and so then *yes*, you learn to *cope*, you learn to *deal with*. And unfortunately sometimes that “dealing with” and coping becomes alcoholism. It becomes drug addiction, it becomes all kinds of *problems!* Right? Violence where you’re beating and hurting someone *because* of the trauma that you experienced that you never got fixed! And now, this is a part of your life.

Throughout this exchange Sis. Shabazz stood on the side of the room where the movie was being projected. The combination of her stern facial expressions, hand gestures and volume was reminiscent of a pastor delivering a sermon. The students, for their part, were doing one of two things--they were either looking at Sis. Shabazz as she spoke or looking quietly at their desks. In this interaction, students recalled various challenges Blacks faced during the Jim Crow era, which included both overt (e.g., killings, rape) and implicit forms of racism (e.g, sharecropping, laws). Sis. Shabazz played an important role in helping to shape this memory. First, Sis. Shabazz specifically asked the class to identify the challenges people experienced during Jim Crow--particularly as it pertained to Black people. Second, Sis. Shabazz at one point admonished the class to write down the examples being cited because they would be appearing on an exam. Finally, each time a student shared out a challenge, Sis. Shabazz repeated, affirmed and

expanded on his or her answer. Ultimately, the participants' conception of Jim Crow mirrored the ways this was talked about in class, with Sis. Shabazz exerting great influence in shaping this understanding.

Strength and achievements. While Kuumba student participants remembered African American history as being replete with trials and tribulations, they by no means portrayed Blacks as helpless victims. On the contrary, students recounted Blacks supporting one another whether by singing spirituals, marching en masse to demand freedom and equality, or establishing free food and clothing programs for the community. Students also spoke about how Blacks worked tirelessly and courageously to make life better not just for themselves but for future generations, including the students themselves. As a result, multiple students reported feeling empowered and having a greater sense of pride in being Black; both of which stemmed from students' realizing the struggles their ancestors faced. The second prominent theme in students' conception of the Black past was that their ancestors were resilient and made significant contributions to society.

One student who spoke very passionately about Blacks' accomplishments was Rashida. I initially found Rashida to be one of the more outspoken students in class. A few times, in fact, Rashida and a close friend of hers would compete to see who could be the first to correctly answer Sis. Shabazz's questions. Rashida almost always wore a cheerful smile and showed great enthusiasm for what Sis. Shabazz was teaching them. Rashida's participation began to wane toward the end of my study, specifically with turning in homework assignments. When I asked her about this, Rashida said she was just being "lazy" (Interview, June 5, 2015). Rashida spoke very highly of the African American and American history classes and the manner in which Sis. Shabazz taught the two courses. Having previously attended a traditional public school, Rashida

claimed she had “zero” prior knowledge about Black history and had no interest in wanting to learn about it: “I didn’t know that African Americans [had] a history. All I knew was Columbus and the English and the Tea Party...regular stuff like that, but I didn’t know what African Americans contributed to [society].” Since taking the two classes with Sis. Shabazz, however, Rashida said her interest level “skyrocketed”:

It’s increased because learning about Africans and what they did what they went through to create this nation and learn about how strong we are now, it’s really interesting because it’s about you and about your *bloodline*. When I wear my hair I’m representing them and my skin color...it’s like my people did this.

Above, Rashida claimed that her interest in Black history grew as a result of learning about the strength of African people, which became a source of pride. Rashida said she learned “how strong we are now” and that the content was engaging because it was about her heritage.

Rashida’s hair--which she wore in locs--now had greater meaning. When Rashida first decided to get locs, “I didn’t know what I was doing” (Interview, June 5, 2015). After taking the African American and American history classes, Rashida claimed to now understand the purpose and significance of wearing her hair in a natural hairstyle. The memory of her ancestors toiling to build this nation contributed to Rashida seeing herself as proudly representing her community and culture.

In describing how Africans created this nation, I could not help but notice that Rashida’s wording closely resembled the way Sis. Shabazz spoke about Blacks’ contributions one day in the African American history class. In preparing students to read the third chapter from *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Woodson, 1933)-- “How We Drifted Away from the Truth”--Sis. Shabazz had the class identify details from two poems that spoke to the “struggles of Reconstruction” and “celebrations of our heritage” (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2015). They were “I,

too, Sing America” (1926) and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), both written by Langston Hughes. What was initially supposed to be a short warm-up activity wound up taking the entire class period, as Sis. Shabazz expounded upon each student’s response. The discussion that ensued mostly centered around the struggles Blacks faced during Reconstruction. Referring to the poem “I, too, Sing America,” for example, one student pointed out that Blacks were forced to eat in the kitchen because of their skin color. This led to Sis. Shabazz asking students why Blacks were treated this way and would not move on until she heard the response she was looking for. A male student finally inferred that “white people didn’t view Black people as being Americans.” Sis. Shabazz enthusiastically affirmed and expanded on his response as follows:

That’s right! You don’t even have the right to claim American as your political or social status. You are in some way an *immigrant* even though most of [whites’] grandparents *were* immigrants, but only they can claim America, right? Land of the free and home of the brave. Only *they* can sing those songs! But for [Hughes] to say “I, *too*” [he is saying] I am also that. I can *also* sing this song. Why? Because my ancestors built this country. My ancestors worked and tilled the soil right? So that’s an excellent example.

I included this excerpt to show how Rashida’s memory of her ancestors--in particular, that they built the foundations of this country--was similar to how Sis. Shabazz talked about Black history in class. Above, Sis. Shabazz tells students that most of whites’ grandparents were immigrants and that Hughes proclaimed “I too” in the poem because “my ancestors built this country” through working and tilling the land. When being interviewed nearly four months after this lesson, Rashida too maintained that Africans created this nation (June 5, 2015). While it is possible that Rashida heard this remark expressed from someone or somewhere else, she stressed to me that she had no knowledge about Black history before taking the African American and American history classes other than “the basic stuff” like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Frederick

Douglass. Moreover, she held Sis. Shabazz in high esteem due to her breadth of knowledge about African American history. Thus, Rashida not only felt that Sis. Shabazz broadened her understanding of Black history but trusted Sis. Shabazz's expertise. It seems plausible, then, that Rashida internalized many of the things she heard Sis. Shabazz say in class; in this case, that African people were responsible for building this country.

In addition to talking about Blacks' contributions, several participants remembered their ancestors as being strong and courageous. As students expounded on their answers, I learned that this conception was rooted in students' memory of the hardships Blacks have faced. Students like Elena, for example, knew about slavery from the previous school she attended but felt her teachers gave her a sanitized version of this experience: "It was like something that happened [for] a little bit of time, and then it was over and then everybody was happy." Elena went on to explain that she now knew slavery lasted for "a longer period of time and the stuff that actually went down in slavery" (May 4, 2015). With the exception of Brenda and Simone who had prior experiences attending African-centered schools, the remaining students also reported knowing little about Black history before having Sis. Shabazz as their history teacher. Remarked Brian, "I knew the surface of a lot of the stuff [Sis. Shabazz is] teaching [but] she goes in depth a lot; a lot more in depth" (Interview, month, date, year). Brian and many others said the two classes showed them what Blacks "went through," as some put it, and spoke in awe about what Blacks have endured. "To me," said Nate, "it was like wow, I can't believe we survived all this. Look at us" (Interview, May 29, 2015). As a group, then, the students' memory of Black history was not just saturated with notions of struggle but that Black people persisted through very arduous circumstances.

The notion that Blacks were resilient resonated throughout my interviews with student participants. One of the questions I posed to them was whether they felt a greater sense of pride in being Black as a result of what they learned in the African American and American history class. The vast majority claimed that they did but their reasoning may not be what some would expect. The pride they felt stemmed from students inserting themselves into the memory of their ancestors' struggle. The following conversation I had with Jordan is representative of this trend (Interview, May 4, 2015):

LR: It seems that before taking these classes you were already proud of being African American. Is that accurate to say?

Jordan: Yes.

LR: So did this class make you feel more proud, less, the same as you did before?

Jordan: More.

LR: More? Okay, what's the source of that? Where did that come from?

Jordan: I guess because even though we went through what we went through, just to say that we came through and we overcame. Like, we strong. I feel like we are so strong.

In this dialogue, I started out by suggesting to Jordan that she was proud of being African American prior to taking the African American and American history classes because she exhibited a strong sense of connectedness to the Black community. Jordan agreed with my assessment but went on to assert that the two classes enhanced her sense of pride. Of all the possible things that could have engendered this feeling for Jordan, it was remembering Blacks' resilience that most impacted her. Along with this, and perhaps more importantly, Jordan consistently used the word "we" as she recounted this memory. In other words rather than taking an objective stance, Jordan spoke as if she experienced this aspect of the past herself.

Simone was another student who personalized the memory of her ancestors' struggles. Among all the student participants, Simone had the most experience attending African-centered schools. She told me she attended African-centered schools "all [her] life" beginning in the first grade. In addition, it appeared she was raised in a household that valued a knowledge of Black history. For instance, Simone shared that her home had a "beautiful" African aesthetic and that she and her family routinely talked about issues impacting the Black community. When she came to Kuumba, then, Simone already had a passion for Black history. "[My interest in Black history] has absolutely increased," she replied. "As I've taken these classes I've come to realize that [the challenges from the past] aren't going away!" (Interview, May 5, 2015). Despite her prior knowledge and experiences around Black history, Simone held Sis. Shabazz in high regard as the other student participants did. So much, in fact, that Simone contended Kuumba would crumble if Sis. Shabazz ever left the school: "[Her] classes are what make this school. That's why we *are* Kuumba. We *are* an African-centered school *because* of Sis. Shabazz's classes." Thus, although Simone came to Sis. Shabazz with comparatively more knowledge of Black history than her peers as well as a high level of interest, Simone was still impacted by Sis. Shabazz's teaching. To be sure, Simone said the following when I asked whether there were any lessons she took away from the African American and American history classes:

I think that all the books [we read in class] have told one lesson, and it's that we were the oppressed. We were the people who were trying to forget about the enslavement and the oppression and depression, and everything that's ever negatively affected us as a people. So I think that the the all-around message is that be proud of who you are. We're Black (claps hands together after each word). We're supposed to be Black [and] proud. We need to stand up for who we are and not just be lazy. Like we need to stand up and rebel against the people who are tryin' to bring us down.

In this excerpt, Simone shares that her main takeaway from her history classes was that Black people were an oppressed group who strived to overcome the injustices they endured. The message Simone subsequently gleaned from this was to have pride in oneself by standing up against those “who are tryin’ to bring us down.” Similar to Jordan above, Simone used the word “we” as if she personally lived the experiences she is remembering. In making this assertion, Simone also specifically referenced the books they read in class that year. There was one particular book, however, that she was most influenced by. Just before she made the comment above, Simone told me her “all-time favorite book” they read in class was *Someone Knows My Name* (Hill, 2008). In fact she had even written a poem titled Aminata, the name of the female protagonist, in which she made connections between herself and the character. According to Simone reading *Someone* made her realize who she is:

I know like my people were very strong. They were determined, they were warriors, and this is who I am! This is who I want to be. I *want* to be a fighter, I *want* to stand up and be proud of who I *am*.

Here, Simone indicates that reading *Somebody Knows My Name* informed her sense of identity. Although the book is a work of fiction, Simone nonetheless referred to it as a source of a historical truth. She did not say the “characters” in the book were strong and determined; she emphatically said it was “my people” who were strong and determined. In the same breath, Simone claimed this is who *she* is. Thus, just as she did in the first excerpt, Simone made herself a part of the memories she had of her ancestors. Simone recalled her ancestors as being “warriors,” which made Simone, by extension, also a warrior.

In this section, I presented excerpts that were representative of the way the nine participants portrayed African American history as one of enduring struggle and that their

ancestors were resilient and made significant contributions to American society. Next, I will present two dominant themes that emerged in students' understanding of the contemporary Black experience. In doing so, my purpose is to show how participants' interpretation of the present was informed by their memory, or conception, of the Black past.

Students' Understanding of the Contemporary Black Experience

The struggle continues. The student participants at Kuumba largely believed that Black people face many of the same struggles as they did in the past. Indeed out of the nine student participants, six students asserted that Black people face the same amount of challenges or more as they did historically. In addition, two students posited that while the Black community faces fewer hardships today, Black people remain targeted by racism and discrimination. What all eight of these students had in common was the perception that the racism Black people experience today is a continuation from the past. The key difference, according to these students, is that it has simply become more implicit and consequently, much harder to identify.

Elena was one such student who felt the challenges Black people experience today are similar to what they were in the past. Like most of the other student participants, Elena had never attended an African-centered school before and said she hardly had any prior knowledge of Black history prior to enrolling in Kuumba. Along with Black history not being a regular part of discussions at home, Elena said her previous schools did not teach her much about her history. For example when she was in Catholic school, Elena remembered learning that "slavery existed, but they didn't really make it seem like it was a big deal. It was like something that happened [and] then it was over and then everybody was happy" (Interview, May 4, 2015). Since taking the African American and American history classes with Sis. Shabazz, Elena felt she knew more

about her history and sparked an interest to learn more: “It like helps me feel more connected to my ancestry. I actually like I knew what happened instead of knowing that like yeah there was slavery, but I didn’t really know what happened.” When I asked Elena to describe the Black experience today given what she learned in the two history classes, she once again honed in on the notion of struggle and observed that racism still exists but in less overt ways:

I think that [the hardships] would be the same but in different ways like...in discrete ways. Like instead of lynching people out in the street like that, like there’s all this police brutality against Black people. Instead of being bluntly racist, they could be racist in like different forms. Like it could be employment. Instead of being blunt about it they’re being [racist] in secretive ways.

Elena noted that police brutality has replaced lynching and cited employment discrimination as an example of how racism has changed from being “blunt” to being “secretive.” Thus, Elena not only remembered the past as being enmeshed in turmoil but that this continues to define the Black experience through more invisible forms of racism.

Brenda was another student who referenced police brutality as evidence that prejudice against Blacks still exists. Unlike most of the other participants, Brenda had prior experience attending an African-centered institution and claimed to have a high level of prior knowledge. It was not too surprising, then, that Brenda already had an interest in studying about Black history before having Sis. Shabazz as her history teacher. Indeed, she ranked her prior interest a five, which was the highest number students could give. In spite of her background, Brenda said she learned a lot from Sis. Shabazz, who Brenda said went into greater depth on topics she had been taught at the previous African-centered school she attended. In my interview with Brenda, she continuously talked about how Sis. Shabazz taught her the truth about her ancestry, including when describing what she enjoyed most about the African American and American history

courses. “I think that what [Sis. Shabazz] teaches us will help us along the way,” Brenda remarked. “We will know our own history and we’ll say that no, this happened...It [does not] matter if it’s in the history book ‘cause we know the actual truth” (Interview, April 30, 2015). It was evident, then, that Brenda believed the information Sis. Shabazz presented to her was accurate and credible. In recounting what she learned from Sis. Shabazz and its connection to present-day society, Brenda somberly replied that Black people are an oppressed group and that this is simply a continuation of the past. Her remarks make it evident that her perception of the present was informed by her conception of the past:

Today I think that we’re back at square one, only because nobody’s really standing up. We will have these little protests against white cops and how the justice system is not right, but nobody’s really caring enough, or our people, [is] not caring enough about the system, ‘cause they say that’s just another white man killing a Black boy. But no, that’s another white man [with] the mindset that we are still slaves, or in a way that we are still um second class. [T]he more we fight back, the more white people’s gonna fight back harder, so I think we just started over again (Interview, April 30, 2015).

In addition to contending that Black people continue to be targeted by whites vis-à-vis police brutality, Kuumba student participants cited the prison system as another “hidden” way of keeping Blacks oppressed; in particular, that prisons are the new form of slavery. It is just that rather than being on plantations, Black people are now put in jail. Then, once they are there, Blacks are required to work for little to no wages which for students is reminiscent of when Blacks were forced to pick cotton. One student who made this connection was Natasha, who claimed “we’re still slaves in some way” (Interview, May 5, 2015). She reiterated this sentiment when I asked her whether she thought the past has any relevance to present day:

Well as I stated before, [the past] is going to be a recurring event that is going to keep popping up. It doesn’t matter if we’re in 2023 or something like that. It’s going to be an event that will keep on happening. Now maybe a couple of years

after you know 2015 or what not, there might be a possible way that, that Black people will be enslaved again. Not in prisons but plantations. Maybe it'll change back to the old Jim Crow instead of the new one.

With the exception of the Civil Rights Movement and Harriet Tubman, Natasha told me she did not know much about Black history until taking the African American and American history classes. In addition to Sis. Shabazz being her “favorite teacher,” Natasha said Sis. Shabazz “understands what she’s talking about” and was glad she taught the courses because “she teaches us very well.” Specifically, Natasha enjoyed learning more about “why [African Americans] were treated so harshly and why we are still treated harshly.” Above, we can see that Natasha internalized this notion to the point where she believed Black people will be forced to return to actual plantations.

Like Natasha, Ezekiel too asserted that today’s prisons are synonymous to when Blacks were enslaved. What was interesting about Ezekiel, however, was that he claimed Black people face far less challenges today than they did historically: “Today? I don’t think it’s even close ‘cause now Black people have the opportunity to be someone” (Interview, June 4, 2015). He conceded that while Blacks may not have *equal* opportunities, it is more than they had in the past. Yet when I asked Ezekiel if Black history has any relevance to present-day, he gave a less favorable assessment of Blacks’ current condition: “The same things that was happening in the time period of slavery is happening today but just in another way,” Ezekiel insisted. “It’s out of the naked eye, so basically you not gonna see people hanging [Blacks] or actually like having slaves, but they gonna find a way that’s in the law to keep people from rising up.” Therefore even though Ezekiel felt Black people have comparatively better opportunities now than they used to, he still believed Blacks are in some ways still slaves. What Elena, Natasha and Ezekiel

all have in common is the belief that this has become more insidious. In elaborating on his response, Ezekiel cited prisons as an example of such “hidden boundaries”: “Black people are [sent] to jail for anything that’s possible just to make a profit for the jail, so that’s another way of slavery right there.” Here, Ezekiel perceived a parallel between modern-day prisons and his memory of slavery in that both entailed the exploitation of Black labor.

There were many overlaps between the way Kuumba students participants historicized current issues impacting the Black community--namely, police brutality and prisons--and how Sis. Shabazz portrayed the Black past in the African American and American history classes. At the start of this study, for instance, I accompanied Sis. Shabazz on a field trip to an African American museum with her two 10th grade sections, one of which I observed for this study (Fieldnotes, December 17, 2014). The purpose of the trip was for students to see an exhibit created by Stephen Hayes titled *Cash Crops*. Through this exhibit, Hayes sought not only to preserve the memory of slavery but to show how it resembles labor exploitation in present day. The students overall seemed moved by the various displays, including one where students were able to try and fit themselves into the image of a slave shape painted onto a three-dimensional column. There were three different size ships, with each made to represent a man, woman and child. Through this exercise, students were able to briefly experience how little space each person had on the ships. Indeed, the tour guide told students of a ship that was for 485 people but was ultimately crammed with over 700 Africans “due to greed.” As we were being ushered onto the last floor of the exhibit, a male student stopped in front of a chalkboard where visitors were encouraged to write notes of reflection. He picked up a piece of chalk and wrote “Liberation” and then walked to catch up with the rest of his classmates.

On the third and final floor of the exhibit, the tour guide emphasized the connections between chattel slavery and mass incarceration. She told the students that people are being sent to jail for minor offenses “especially Black and Brown folk.” As evidence, the tour guide pointed to the jail across the street that was visible from a nearby window. The tour guide also spoke about the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner and Michael Brown as students quietly listened and nodded their heads in agreement. At one point the guide rhetorically asked students if selling loose cigarettes are worth dying for--a reference to Eric Garner death--to which a student remarked that they could have tasered him instead. “We got to heal,” the tour guide concluded emphatically. “Black history is American history...All lives matter. Black lives matter.” Minutes later, the same student who had written “Liberation” on the reflection wall went to the chalkboard again. This time, he wrote, “Never give up.” As we were packing up to leave, Sis. Shabazz explained how sweatshop workers make uniforms for the government and that “our people” continue to be enslaved through the prison system.

Rashida recounted their trip to the exhibit months later when explaining why she felt the Black community faces the same degree of challenges today as they did in the past but in “a legal modern way” that Rashida referred to as “the New Jim Crow”:

LR: So, how would you describe the new Jim Crow?

Rashida: So in the old Jim Crow it was a law where you can't vote unless your grandfather or something like that was registered to vote. Of course your grandfather wasn't registered to vote 'cause he would have been a slave or whatever you know back then and you can't unless you pass this literacy test and stuff like that. Whites couldn't even understand [the tests]...so it was straight racism; you can't vote. They just [did not] want us to vote. But now, if you do something petty and get locked up and we come out [and] now it's the same thing. You can't vote.

LR: So you think racism still exists?

Rashida: Yes

LR: In the same form or different?

Rashida: In the same form but in a different way. Like the legal way.

LR: What do you think led to the new Jim Crow? Where did it stem from?

Rashida: They don't want us to succeed. They tryin' to re-enslave us. They're tryin' to do that again. When we went to the African American museum [we] saw the federal jail across the street, and that they were [exploiting] labor, so they're tryin' to re-enslave us. They don't want us to succeed.

Above, Rashida maintains that Black people continue to live under the system of Jim Crow but in a “legal modern way.” To support her argument, Rashida drew explicitly from what she learned in the African American and American history classes, including their visit to the *Cash Crop* exhibit. It was clear that Sis. Shabazz also had a direct influence on the connections Rashida made, specifically with regards to her memory of the “old” Jim Crow. Notice, for example, how closely Rashida’s description of the old Jim Crow mirrored remarks Sis. Shabazz made in the American history class about how Blacks were deprived the right to vote during the early stages of the modern Civil Rights Movement (Fieldnotes, January 20, 2015):

You had these literacy tests or [policies requiring Blacks to] interpret the Constitution or you can only vote if somebody *vouches* for you by somebody that already has the right to vote...Even if it was the Grandfather Clause that said well if your *grandfather* could vote, then you can vote. Well again, my grandfather was probably enslaved at this point. It's 1965 right? And so *no* my grandparents didn't have the right to voice and so neither do I, and so I can't get the right to vote. All these barriers being placed in front of people even though 15th amendment had been passed, the 19th amendment had been passed, we have the right, but why are people then still infringing upon that right?

The similarities between Rashida’s recollection of the old Jim Crow system and Sis. Shabazz’s statements about restrictive voting laws are undeniable. Seemingly repeating what Sis. Shabazz

told them in class, Rashida recounted a law where Blacks were permitted to vote if their grandfathers could but noted “of course your grandfather wasn’t registered to vote ‘cause he would have been a slave.” Moreover, Rashida talked about the use of literacy tests just as Sis. Shabazz had done. In the end, it appeared Rashida had internalized what Sis. Shabazz presented to them about the past and present Black experience, leading her to believe that the Black experience in America was, and continues to be, characterized by struggle.

Sis. Shabazz reinforced the persistence of racism and discrimination throughout the remainder of the school term. Four months after their visit to the African American museum, for example, Sis. Shabazz had students read select chapters from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). To introduce this book to students, Sis. Shabazz showed students a documentary titled *Slavery by Another Name* (Pollard, 2012) as she did when using *The New Jim Crow* last year. She emphasized that the documentary is not about slavery “because of course we’ve passed the enslavement period” (Fieldnotes, April 9, 2016). Rather, Sis. Shabazz explained that the documentary talks about the convict leasing system in the 1920s and describes the ways in which the U.S. government “intentionally kind of created a system which has become the prison industrial complex that we know of today, which are these systems of prisons all over the country, and this form of punishment that they say is justice.” Here, Sis. Shabazz made a direct comparison between modern-day prisons and convict leasing systems established in the early 20th century.

A few weeks after watching *Slavery By Another Name* Sis. Shabazz explicated how the recent murder of Trayvon Martin is analogous to the ways Black men have been killed since the days of slavery. She did this through narrating scenes from Lee Daniels’ *The Butler* (2013), a

film she used to teach students about the different historical time periods (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2015). Through the four days they spent watching the movie, Sis. Shabazz stopped the film numerous times to explain what they were seeing “through a historic eye” and discuss questions from the movie guide she created for them. The first place she stopped was after the opening scene, which was a flashback to when the protagonist’s father was murdered for trying to protect his wife. In the scene the protagonist--then a young child--is working alongside his father in a field. A white male, whom I presumed to be the overseer, goes to the child’s mother and says he needs help in a nearby shed (in actuality, he raped her). The mother reluctantly goes with him as her child and husband watch in silence. The child asks his father where his mom and the man are going, to which his father sternly tells him to “get back to work.” At the child’s insistence, the father attempts to address the overseer when he returns to the field from the shed, whereupon the latter shoots the father with a gun, killing him instantly. “Because of the laws in the South,” Sis. Shabazz said to the class, “that was absolutely legal. And that white man would never be prosecuted, would never be punished for the murder of that Black man because if he said [the white male] did anything to his wife, nobody’s gonna believe him.” From here, Sis. Shabazz segued into a discussion on the similarities between sharecropping and slavery:

Sis. Shabazz: What is sharecropping?

Student 1: It’s Blacks being able to choose where they work to [grow] crops to earn money, but usually the owner of the land tries to keep them in a constant state of debt, so they have to keep working on their land. And [the sharecroppers] have to abide by all of [the land owner’s] rules.

Sis. Shabazz: Absolutely. And so [sharecropping] is very synonymous to what system that they were already under?

[Several students call out ‘slavery’]

Sis. Shabazz: Slavery, right? Peonage is the same thing, okay. So as we've talked about the convict leasing system, the peonage system, sharecropping is peonage, okay? It is a form of *slavery*. It is *debt* slavery, and that's what peonage is! It's debt slavery.

In the preceding dialogue, Sis. Shabazz used her authority as the teacher to have students remember the sharecropping system as another form of slavery. After validating the student's explanation of sharecropping, Sis. Shabazz proceeded to ask the class what system sharecropping was similar to "that they were already under." Here, Sis. Shabazz all but told students that the answer is slavery. The images from the movie's opening scene likely also played a role in students thinking the answer was slavery, as all of the Black characters were shown working in a field and being supervised by a white male. Sis. Shabazz concluded her remarks on the significance of sharecropping by explicitly telling students that sharecropping and peonage are both essentially slavery.

Below, Sis. Shabazz went onto frame the murder of Trayvon Martin as a recent example of how Black men have been unjustly killed at the hands of whites since slavery. It began when a student expressed confusion about the opening scene in *The Butler*, which I described above. Sis. Shabazz contended that all of the Black characters in the field were sharecroppers including the father who was killed.

Student 1: How are [whites] able to kill them if they're sharecroppers?

Sis. Shabazz: Because the law in the state still says that *one*, you have the right to kill any *man* or any person that you accuse of doing something wrong, right? So for example if you remember 1954, Emmitt Till did the same thing. He said to a girl walking passed, a white girl, 'hey baby.' Same idea! Any Black man that says something inappropriate or in any way can be construed as disrespectful to a *white* individual, white man or woman, can be killed! *Legally*. Again, think about Florida, the state of Florida. So we're talking about laws in the deep South. Florida, recently 2014, what is that man's name that shot Trayvon Martin?

Student 2: George Zimmerman

Sis. Shabazz: George Zimmerman. Same exact thing, where in the South you have a *law* that *allows* for a person to say that it is self-defense. They were defending themselves, [the victims] were a threat of life, because that little boy threatened [George Zimmerman's] life.

Student 3: The stand your ground law.

Sis. Shabazz: The stand your ground law. That law, that type of law, those are the types of laws that allow a Black man to be murdered by a white man and not *one, ever* had been convicted of murdering a black man through lynching. It's the same idea.

Here, the first student was confused by Sis. Shabazz's assertion that the Black characters in the opening scene of *The Butler* (Daniels, 2014) were sharecroppers. In response, Sis. Shabazz explained that just as with Emmitt Till, the law during sharecropping was such that it was legal to kill any Black male who whites perceived as engaging in inappropriate or offensive behavior.

Sis. Shabazz therefore suggested that whites could accuse and kill Black men for arbitrary "crimes." Indeed, she reminded the class that Emmitt Till was viewed as a threat and subsequently murdered because he said "hey baby" to a white girl. Taken together, Sis. Shabazz asserted that first, sharecropping is synonymous to slavery and second, that the laws that acquitted George Zimmerman of Trayvon Martin's death are the same as those that permitted whites to legally kill Blacks during sharecropping. In doing so, Sis. Shabazz portrayed slavery as an on-going struggle that plagues Blacks well into the 21st century, which was what several student participants claimed as well.

While the majority of Kuumba student participants felt that Black people continue to be victims of a racist society albeit in different forms--e.g., police brutality and mass incarceration--there was one student who expressed a vastly divergent point of view from the rest. When I

asked Jordan to describe the Black experience today in light of what she learned in the African American and American history classes, Jordan argued that the Black community faces fewer challenges they did in the past. As evidence, she cited that Blacks now have the right to vote and women have more opportunities than they did previously such as being politicians, doctors and lawyers. She conceded that some Black people are treated unfairly but blamed Blacks for their mistreatment: “I do think some African Americans give them the right to treat us that way...I don’t want to blame it just on everyone else because sometimes it is us. Sometimes [we] do exactly what they say we do” (Interview, May 4, 2015). As to who she meant by *them* and *they*, Jordan clarified “Caucasians” and “people that is not our race.” Jordan did go on to assert that Blacks should have more power than they currently have; on the other hand, she once again attributed this to deficits in the Black community: “It’s a lot of things we should have that we don’t have today because we’re so lazy.” In both instances, Jordan held Black people responsible for the hardships they experience.

Jordan also implicated Black people for the challenges they experience in class as well, including during a discussion on whether Black children have access to a quality education. Jordan argued that Black students can receive a good education but “we don’t take it in our own hands” (Fieldnotes, January 15, 2015). I wondered to myself to what degree Sis. Shabazz informed Jordan’s point of view, as Sis. Shabazz made a similar remark just moments earlier when lecturing the class for not doing the previous night’s homework. Referring to a chapter they had just read from *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Woodson, 1933), Sis. Shabazz reminded students how Black children used to go to “one room hovels” before exclaiming that something children always do is “you don’t place yourself into that quality of education” to understand that

students share this responsibility with their teachers. It is possible, then, that hearing Sis. Shabazz assert how children do not understand that they too must be accountable for their education influenced, or at the very least reinforced, Jordan's belief that Black students in this day and age have the ability to receive a quality education but choose not to. In yet a different class discussion, Jordan launched into a critique of Black women's work ethic as they were addressing stereotypes surrounding Black men and women in today's society. She argued that compared to the past, "we don't have to work as hard to get what we want." Young Black women do not know "what it means to be broken or what it means to be controlled," Jordan went on to note. "They feel like it's easy" (Fieldnotes, February 23, 2015). Here, Jordan suggests that Black women do not work as hard as Black women did historically because the former do not have as many obstacles to overcome. Certainly, this is consistent with Jordan's claim that the Black community faces fewer challenges than they did in the past and her tendency to place the blame on Blacks themselves. In short, unlike the other eight student participants, Jordan did not indicate any awareness of institutionalized racism, which could help to explain why Jordan consistently held Blacks culpable for the select obstacles they do face.

Solutions unclear. While the first three themes paralleled Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history, the fourth theme represented a break from Sis. Shabazz's historical narrative. As I discussed above, most student participants expressed that there has been little improvement in the experiences of Black people with regards to racism and discrimination. With the exception of one student, Jordan, this group of students maintained that Black people are still targeted by racism but in more insidious ways. For example, Elena argued that police brutality has replaced lynching and Ezekiel and others contended that slavery persists in the form of

prisons. As a group, the students cited these as the two most prominent examples of how racism has become more “hidden” and “discrete.” While it was generally easy for student participants to identify challenges impacting the Black community, however, they were largely uncertain about how, if at all, these issues could be resolved. Their rationales ranged from a lack of perceived unity among Black people to simply not knowing where or how to begin to address the problems they identified. In what follows I present excerpts from interview and fieldnote data that illustrate the sense of helplessness and discouragement students conveyed as they spoke about potential solutions to pressing hardships and discuss the ways in which students’ views were informed by their memory, or interpretation, of the past. I also share the perspective of one student, Brian, who emerged as the outlier in the group.

Some student participants felt strongly that the only way Blacks will be able to overcome prevailing hardships is if they work as a collective like they did in the past. They had doubts, however, as to how likely this is to happen. One of these students was Nate, who addressed the need for unity during a Socratic Seminar in one of the African American history classes. In preparation for this activity, Sis. Shabazz assigned students to read Chapter 4 of *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Woodson, 1933) and subsequently discuss the following prompt in class: “The mis-education of the Negro is no longer relevant because all cultures have an equal opportunity to engage in developing a solution to poor schooling. What is the solution to poor schooling according to Dr. Woodson?” (Fieldnotes, February 26, 2015). During Socratic Seminars, students would sit in a circle in the middle of the room with approximately twelve at a time. For the next 20 minutes or so, students would pose questions and challenge each other as they shared their thoughts on the overarching question. In this specific session, Nate asked his

group if America had “changed for the better toward the Negro.” Simone replied that it had not, citing that “the government is relying on us not to succeed” which is why it is building more prisons instead of schools. “How are we hanging ourselves?” Nate asked in return. “How are we putting ourselves in prison if that’s what you’re saying?” Simone replied that it is because Black people are more interested in making “fast money” rather than pursuing an education. Borrowing terms used by Woodson, Nate countered that the real problem stems from Blacks having “drifted away from our sense of unity as a culture and as a people”:

Back when we were enslaved, we were all together. We were all like yeah we’re gonna help you out and I’m gonna make sure you’re okay and I’m going to take care of you. But nowadays you don’t really see us banning together for good things. When we are together in groups, we usually aren’t doing the best things. Maybe we’re in gangs or maybe we’re selling drugs and things of that nature. So I believe it stems from the community as well as school. They go hand in hand.

As this excerpt shows, Nate’s memory of the past informed his understanding of present day; specifically, the underlying cause of why so many Black people are in prisons. Nate conveyed a conception of the Black past whereby people of African ancestry always supported one another, especially through trying times, and came “together for good things.” Absent from Nate’s memory are any instances of division, conflict or questionable conduct. Based on his recollection of the past, Nate concluded that Blacks today are less cohesive and that when do come together, they typically engage in illicit activities. Consistent with Nate’s belief that Blacks are less unified than they have been historically, he frequently cited the need for a Black community as a key starting point in addressing current obstacles. As the following excerpt illustrates, however, he was unsure how this was to be accomplished:

At other points [in the past] you could really see what we had to do. Civil Rights Movement, ok well we know that we have the power to you know, protest. They did that. Black power movement, I guess if we can do all this stuff for ourselves,

why can't we? They did that. It was pretty straightforward, wouldn't you agree? It was pretty straightforward ideas. Slavery, we have to get out of slavery. We have to escape, go back to Africa. Or like Frederick Douglass, you can help try to get a bill to where we could do for ourselves. Right after we came out of slavery we were instantly conscious that (claps hands together) we need to be able to vote. You know, they were pretty straightforward and we *always* knew what we had to do. We always had a plan. We had some sort of direction. What's our direction now? There's something we're missing that everybody else has but we don't know it yet. Or at least, I don't know it. And I don't see most of the Black community knowing it either. Other than needing a Black community what else do we need and how will we get this community, you know? It's because we have to learn something new that we haven't really learned before.

The despair with which Nate talked about issues impacting today's Black community were clearly informed by his understanding of Black history. In Nate's romanticized understanding of the historical Black experience, Blacks "always knew" what they had to do; they always had a strategy in place. By concluding that there needs to be a Black community, Nate further implied that Blacks worked collectively. Against this idyllic backdrop, Nate did not know how Blacks could tackle the problems they face today. The only thing Nate could think of was that there needs to be more unity among Black people. Even with this, however, Nate was dubious as to how to achieve this. In this way, Nate conveyed a sense of helplessness. He was aware that injustices persist for people of African ancestry but was at a loss as to how Blacks should proceed. In the end, Nate's conception of the past left him without a sense of direction.

Contributing to students' sense of hopelessness is not knowing exactly who or what they are fighting against. Take for instance the conversation I had below with Rashida concerning the new Jim Crow. As readers may recall from the previous section, Rashida argued that the new Jim Crow is an example of how Blacks continue to be oppressed "but in a legal modern way" (Interview, June 5, 2015). When I asked her to elaborate, Rashida explained that in the "old" Jim Crow," Blacks were kept from voting through such laws as the Grandfather Clause and

literacy tests: “Whites couldn’t even understand [the literacy tests]...so it was straight racism, you can’t vote.” She continued: “But now, if you do something petty and get locked up...it’s the same thing. You can’t vote.” I proceeded to ask Rashida where she felt this stemmed from.

LR: What do you think led to the new Jim Crow? Where did it stem from?

Rashida: They don’t want us to succeed. They tryin’ to re-enslave us. They’re tryin’ to do that again. When we went to the African American museum [we] saw the federal jail across the street, and that they were [exploiting] labor, so they’re tryin’ to re-enslave us. They don’t want us to succeed.

LR: Who is ‘they’?

Rashida: White people. Not all white people though. The man. I don’t know who ‘the man’ is [chuckles]. The Illuminati. I don’t know what it is!

In retrospect, asking Rashida what caused the new Jim Crow was a bit of a confusing question. Nonetheless, it revealed the difficulty Rashida and others had in determining who to hold responsible for the challenges plaguing the Black community. When Rashida recounted the old Jim Crow, she specified that whites were the ones who enacted the literacy tests. She quickly became flustered, though, when I asked her who or what was responsible for the new Jim Crow (read: mass incarceration of Black people). She offered several responses. At first implicated whites but then modified her answer to say it was “not all white people.” She then suggested it was “the man” and “the Illuminati.” In the end, Rashida admitted that she did not know who or what was “they.”

On a more micro level, multiple students even questioned their individual capacity to effect change. Natasha, for instance, said she would consider engaging in activism but did not think it would make a meaningful difference: “I’ll [protest] to see if it’s gonna work, to be a supporter [but] in the back of my head I don’t think it’s going to work” (Interview, May 5, 2015).

Elena offered a similar response when I asked her if there was anything she could potentially do to eliminate prejudice toward Blacks: “I don’t see myself as like an activist type...I just don’t think that my message would get across, so I haven’t really thought about that” (Interview, May 28, 2015). Neither Natasha or Elena, then, felt there was anything they could personally do to help achieve equality. Ezekiel was perhaps the most dejected of the group. He argued that protesting was “easier back then” because “people would really take notice.” Today, he asserted, it would just show that “you cared” which is why he would not even try:

So like if I was to actually start a movement, I really don’t think a lot of people would even join ‘cause they’ll probably [think] this isn’t gonna work and stuff like that so like people isn’t gonna take a risk of trying to try and make a change. They’ll just sit back and watch [so] I don’t think I would waste my time. (Interview, June 4, 2015).

As with Elena and Natasha, Ezekiel did not see himself having a significant impact in efforts to combat racism. Ezekiel believed that movements were more effective in the past because they commanded more attention. The implication here, then, is that protesting no longer carries the same weight and that this discourages Blacks from taking part. For this reason, Ezekiel insists he would not “waste [his] time.”

As I noted when introducing this section, an overwhelming number of Kuumba student participants expressed uncertainty about what could reasonably be done to combat institutionalized racism, namely in the form of police brutality and mass incarceration. One student, however, held a vastly different perspective than the rest. Brian acknowledged the prevalence of systemic racism but at the same time suggested it was Black’s fault (Interview, May 12, 2015):

If you know the odds are against you don’t play that hand. That just makes sense. If you know a cop is more likely to stop you because of your race, then don’t do

anything that gives them a reason to stop you. And don't ride around with something illegal in your car if you know you're gonna be like targeted then just disaffirm what they think they're targeting you for. I think that would--that should help.

I was admittedly surprised by Brian's assertion. Brian acknowledged that Blacks are racially profiled by law enforcement but then appeared to blame Blacks for being arrested. If Blacks know they are more likely to be apprehended by the police, Brian explained, they should avoid doing anything that "gives them a reason to stop you." In stark contrast to the others whom expressed awareness of institutional racism, Brian did not recommend Blacks band together to demand justice and he was not confounded by the complexities of systemic racism. On the contrary, Brian felt the solution was simple. Blacks should "disaffirm" stereotypes that cause them to be targeted. Fittingly, Brian later shared that the one important lesson he gained from the African American and American history classes was to "be defined by no one but yourself."

Conclusion

My findings suggest that students' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience were shaped by Sis. Shabazz's representation of the Black past. In reflecting on what they learned in the African American and American history classes, the participants relied heavily on curricular materials and teacher and classroom discourse to help remember, or reconstruct, the historical Black experience. Students in turn used what they learned about Black history to draw conclusions about the present-day Black experience. In all, there were four dominant themes that emerged from the data, which I divided evenly between the two sections. While the first three themes--*enduring struggle, strength and achievements*, and *the struggle continues*--corresponded with Sis. Shabazz's historical narrative, the fourth did not. Taken together, the participants presented Black history as continuity narrative similar to their teacher

Sis. Shabazz but the fourth theme revealed that students did not necessarily know how to go about effecting change.

Two themes emerged in Kuumba student participants' understanding of the historical Black experience. The first is what I refer to as *enduring struggle*. That is, all of the student participants characterized the Black past as what Patterson (1971) refers to as a "catastrophic" interpretation of Black history. Patterson argues that those who subscribe to this conception view Black history as "one long disaster, a chronicle of horrors in which Blacks experienced every conceivable form of exploitation, humiliation and anguish at the hands of their white oppressors" (p. 299). Indeed, each student's description of what he or she learned in the two courses included the notion of struggle. As I noted, even when I asked students what they recall learning about the nature of Black life before slavery, many students explained that Blacks were in the process of *becoming* of slaves. In describing the various hardships Blacks encountered, the majority of student participants described both explicit and implicit forms of racism.

The second theme I presented with regards to students' understanding of Black history was *strength and achievements*. This went hand in hand with the first theme. For many of the students, learning what Blacks actually "went through," as some students put it, made them realize their ancestors were more strong and resilient than they previously thought. For example Jordan shared that the history classes left her feeling more proud of being Black "because even though we went through what we went through, just to say that we came through and we overcame...Like, we strong. I feel like we are so strong" (Interview, May 4, 2015). Jordan's comment was representative of the group in that while it was troubling to learn how much their ancestors suffered, they felt it revealed the strength Black people possess.

Consistent with the participants portrayal of Black history as a continuity narrative, several students maintained that the struggle for justice and equality is as relevant today as it was in the past. Under *the struggle continues*, I discussed how the majority of student participants believed racism remains a prevalent issue but in more insidious ways; namely in the form of police brutality and mass incarceration. In Brenda's words, students cited both as examples of how Blacks continued to be treated as "slaves" and "second class" citizens.

Thus far, it appears Sis. Shabazz was successful in using Black history to promote social activism. To meet this goal, Sis. Shabazz said she strived to help students make connections between the struggles of the past, the present and students themselves. The fourth theme, *solutions unclear*, did not correspond with Sis. Shabazz's historical narrative. While the participants collectively demonstrated a heightened degree of critical consciousness, they did not have a clear sense of how to address these challenges. For one, some argued that Black people lack the unity needed to fight against racism and discrimination. In addition to this, it was difficult for students to ascertain from whom to demand justice. Even if they could, most students doubted their own ability to effect change. The data suggests that their feelings of pessimism and futility were informed by their memory of the past, particularly in terms of social movements as well as the present socio-political climate. When recalling how people of African ancestry resisted injustice in the past, many students evoked images of Blacks working tirelessly together as a community. Furthermore, as Nate recounted, Blacks "always" knew what to do. In essence, students believed that in order to effect change Black people first needed to be united. They were doubtful, though, as to how or if this would happen. When students shared this with me, I would bring up the Black Lives Matter movement to see if this would challenge their

views. I found that while the participants largely felt protesting and even rioting were effective in bring attention to Blacks' struggles--in particular police brutality--they thought these protests have done little to bring about justice. As examples, they cited that few cops had been indicted in recent killings of unarmed Black men, women and children and if they were, the cops were found not guilty. The participants remarks underscore the need for educators to not only complicate the narrative of social movements but discuss how students might go about adapting the strategies their ancestors used in the past to fit the present context.

CHAPTER 6

MR. ABATI'S REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

What's really important about the March on Washington is what happened the next year...[The Civil Rights Act of 1964]...banned segregation and discrimination in pretty much all public places and American life...in schools, in job employment, in public facilities, like it was the thing that basically got rid of Jim Crow. Or at least it was supposed to. Story for another day. And therefore we are done, okay? - Mr. Abati

I began observing Mr. Abati's African American history class in mid-December of the 2014-2015 academic year as I did with Sis. Shabazz. Thus Mr. Abati had also been teaching the course approximately three months before I began visiting Smith. Similar to Sis. Shabazz, Mr. Abati also began the year with lessons on ancient Africa but ended the year with a unit specifically focused on the Black experience in the 20th century. Some of the topics addressed in this final unit were *Loving v. Virginia*, MOVE and the election of Barack Obama. One major difference between Sis. Shabazz's and Mr. Abati's courses was that while the former taught in a cyclical fashion--for instance, she spoke about slavery at multiple points in the year--Mr. Abati taught in chronological order (e.g., slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, etc.). Consequently, Mr. Abati rarely, if ever, revisited periods he had already discussed. In addition, whereas Sis. Shabazz created her own curricula for the African American and American history courses, Smith's charter network provided Mr. Abati--and other teachers who taught the African American history course--a curriculum prepared by the network's curriculum writer.

Overall, Mr. Abati portrayed the historical Black experience as a *story of triumph* (Thomas, 2012). My definition of *triumph* has been influenced by literacy scholar Ebony Thomas' "The Next Chapter of Our Story: Rethinking African American Metanarratives in School and Society" (2012). According to Thomas, this interpretation of African American history depicts Blacks as being "active agents fighting for their own physical, social, and economic liberation from stifling oppression" (p. 7). This narrative thus consists of celebratory stories of what Blacks have achieved in the face of insurmountable obstacles. This triumphant conception of African American history emerged through Mr. Abati's instruction on African American history on two levels. From a curricular perspective, Mr. Abati began the course by teaching about ancient Africa and slavery and ended with the election of President Obama, the latter of which Thomas asserts is "the ultimate symbol of the triumph metanarrative" (p. 7). From a lesson perspective, virtually each class began with Mr. Abati introducing a form of injustice Blacks faced followed by explaining how Blacks challenged their oppression and what Blacks achieved through their acts of bravery and determination.

In this chapter, I will use an examination of fieldnotes, interview data and curricular materials to discuss how Mr. Abati represented, or talked about, the nature of the historical Black experience in his course. First, I provide a portrait of Mr. Abati's pedagogical approach to teaching the African American history course as well as an overview of the classroom setting. Following this, I present three major themes that emerged in Mr. Abati's representation of African American history, which I refer to as *oppression*, *empowerment* and *victory*. My goal is to show readers how the way in which Mr. Abati privileged and talked about certain aspects of the historical Black experience lent itself to shaping a particular way of remembering, or

understanding, the nature of the Black past and its connection to the present. Readers will note that student participants are referred to by name.

A Portrait of Mr. Abati and the Classroom Environment

Mr. Abati was a tall African American male in his early 30's. This was Mr. Abati's third year teaching at the school, throughout which he exclusively taught the African American history course. Prior to teaching at Smith, Mr. Abati studied urban planning and taught for three years as a Teach for America corps member. When he applied to work at Smith he applied for a position teaching history, as he taught history courses at his previous school. Although Mr. Abati did not possess a degree in social studies education or African American studies as Sis. Shabazz did, he expressed confidence in his ability to teach the course effectively. This revealed itself as he explained the degree to which he followed the prescribed curriculum. Nothing that he uses it as a source, Mr. Abati rhetorically asked "what are they going to say to me?" Beyond teaching the African American history course, Mr. Abati also served on a committee that allowed him to provide feedback on the design and implementation of the curriculum and chaired the school's Black History Month committee.

In class, Mr. Abati was what I would describe as a 'taskmaster,' as he was always managing different tasks at any given moment. From the minute students arrived at his door, Mr. Abati stood at the entryway to greet them on the way in the room and direct them to begin their warm-up activity. Mr. Abati typically gave students five minutes to complete these activities and used them as a way to review what he taught the previous day. When the alarm would go off to indicate the time had expired--he kept time on his cellphone or the SmartBoard--Mr. Abati usually asked two to three students to share their answers, whereupon he would fill in any gaps

in information as he saw fit. Throughout the remaining 50 minutes, Mr. Abati would review the lesson's objective, watch a short video clip or analyze an image related to the day's topic, give a short lecture on the topic, and then have students read and take notes that addressed the given day's objective and essential question for the unit. Mr. Abati almost always had an exit assessment at the end of class to see that students met the objective but often ran out of time. This was one of the reasons the warm-up activities served as a review. Nearly every lesson was structured in this manner and throughout this time Mr. Abati continuously paced around the room to make sure students were on task. Since the desks were arranged in two rows in the shape of a horseshoe, Mr. Abati often walked back and forth from one side of the room to the other.

The students in the class demonstrated varying levels of engagement and were quite rambunctious. On one hand, the participants' perceptions of Mr. Abati suggested the class had a great deal of respect for him and enjoyed the class. The students in the class would also show great enthusiasm for what they were learning as evidenced by their attentiveness and asking Mr. Abati to offer more details of what he was teaching. On the other hand, I frequently observed students talking or engaging in other disruptive behavior while Mr. Abati was teaching. Moreover, there was always at least three to four students who had their heads resting on their desk during instructional time. When Mr. Abati saw this, he would walk over and gently encourage the student to sit up or ask if he or she needed to get some air or a drink of water. Within minutes, though, he or she returned to their resting position. Sometimes, the student would not sit up at all. When students' side chatter or lackluster participation became too overwhelming for Mr. Abati, he would stop teaching and tell students how frustrated he was, which usually quieted students down.

As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Abati was given a curriculum to follow. However, Mr. Abati did not feel this constrained his teaching. In addition to creating his own objectives, Mr. Abati explained that he modified the content as he saw fit and viewed the curriculum more as a resource than as a binding document: “Even though [the African American history teachers are] essentially given unit plans...we pretty much have our kind of freedom to maneuver within it” (Interview, July 3, 2015). Mr. Abati’s claims were verified in conversations I had with two Smith staff members who were responsible for making sure the African American history course was being taught effectively. The two staff members were Mr. Hozier and Ms. Perkins. Mr. Hozier relayed to me, for example, that while the curriculum dictates specific terms and concepts students have to know by the end of the year and the units that have to be taught, Mr. Abati “has flexibility in how to meet those ends” (Interview, May 21, 2015). Mr. Hozier did suggest, though, that Mr. Abati may have been more scrutinized if he were a first year teacher.

Like Sis. Shabazz, Mr. Abati also incorporated a range of text and visual materials in his course. One distinct difference, though, is that Mr. Abati’s video clips were hardly ever longer than five minutes, as opposed to Sis. Shabazz who had students watch full-length movies in her class. This was primarily because Mr. Abati viewed video clips as “a great way to preview the lesson and understand what’s going on before we even talk about it” (Interview, July 3, 2015). With regards to reading materials, Mr. Abati had a class set of African American history textbooks that were adopted by the school district. Mr. Abati used the textbook sparingly though and usually only assigned a few paragraphs for students to read at a time. Thus Mr. Abati frequently provided supplementary reading materials that he thought would be more accessible for his students: “[The textbook is], in my opinion, too advanced even if we’re trying to be

rigorous. So I supplemented it with other things.” Mr. Abati went onto explain that he had the freedom not to use the textbook at all or to bring in other books, which Ms. Perkins and Mr. Hozier told me as well. Mr. Abati indicated that he would have liked to use novels but was not provided the funds to do so.

Next, I will present and discuss the three major themes that comprised Mr. Abati’s representation of African American history.

Oppression

Similar to Sis. Shabazz, Mr. Abati spoke to students about the various economic, political and social challenges that historically impacted people of African-ancestry. While one could argue that it would be impossible to teach African American history without discussing issues of racism and discrimination, this seemed to come from a personal place for Mr. Abati. In speaking with Mr. Abati about what themes he tried to emphasize in his course, he expressed that Blacks “have undergone hell” (Interview, March 20, 2015) and that there have been “many obstacles toward African Americans’ success and keeping African Americans down” (Interview, July 3, 2015). Thus, while it could be argued that Mr. Abati was simply following the curriculum, the notion of struggle was also a part of Mr. Abati’s personal conception of Black history that seemed to then influence the way he spoke about the historical Black experience. While oppression emerged as a dominant theme in both teachers’ representation of Black history, however, they did not talk about it in the same way. In contrast to Sis. Shabazz, Mr. Abati tended to downplay Blacks’ struggles by providing only surface-level information or failing to address notions of injustice altogether. In my fieldnotes I referred to these moments as “missed opportunities” for fostering a deeper understanding of the historical Black experience.

An example of how Mr. Abati minimized Blacks' hardships was how he addressed the topic of segregated schools, which came up multiple times during my observations. One such instance took place at the beginning of the third academic quarter when Mr. Abati introduced the four units they would be learning about in the new report card period (Fieldnotes, January 28, 2015). The units in order were (1) Standing up for the Community (2) Making a Movement (3) The Great Depression and New Deal and (4) Military Might. During this introductory lesson, Mr. Abati presented a list of topics that would be addressed that quarter and asked them to look in their textbook and subsequently determine if each term reflected an example of "community," "empowerment," or "identity." After having the class work independently to organize the topics according to these three themes, Mr. Abati gave students five minutes to confer with a peer and come to consensus as to what category each topic "best fits" before discussing the terms a group. The list of topics Mr. Abati presented was as follows:

Ida B. wells

- A table of South Carolina's Black and White public schools
- Booker T. Washington
- W.E.B Du Bois
- Map of military posts where Black troops served in 1866-1917
- Madam CJ Walker
- Emergence of national African Americans organizations
- NAACP march in New York City

Although the second topic pertained to segregated schools, Mr. Abati did not address it as such in the discussion that ensued. One student said he classified the table as an example of "community" because it showed the number of students and teachers that attended Black and white public schools. Disagreeing with his assessment, a second student chimed in that the table reflected "identity" because white and Black students went to separate schools. Hearing the

different responses, Mr. Abati acknowledged that it can be difficult to come to a consensus and proceeded to poll the class to see what they thought was the better answer. To resolve the dispute, Mr. Abati said they will place the table under “community” without ever mentioning that it reflected segregated schools. Ultimately, Mr. Abati’s instructions silenced the memory of segregated schools because students were explicitly told to consider the topics through the lens of community, identity or empowerment. In interviews, Mr. Abati explained that in striving to teach African American history “as a story,” he intentionally and willingly emphasized these themes because they represented the curricular framework for the course. It is possible Mr. Abati intentionally glossed over the issue of segregated schooling because this was only an introductory lesson. As readers will see below, however, Mr. Abati continued to trivialize the issue of school segregation when teaching students about the significance of *Brown versus the Board of Education*.

Mr. Abati presented his lesson on *Brown* approximately two months after the introductory lesson I detailed above (Fieldnotes, April 7, 2015). By the end of the class, Mr. Abati wanted his students to understand that this was a pivotal case in the greater Civil Rights Movement. Over the next 50 minutes, Mr. Abati showed students a trailer to a movie about Ruby Bridges (Palcey, 2013), had them analyze an image from an old newspaper showing that the Supreme Court had banned segregation in public schools and take notes from their textbook. For the latter, Mr. Abati had students read three paragraphs from a section titled, “Brown and the Coming Revolution” and stopped briefly after each so they could discuss what they read. For the third paragraph, Mr. Abati had students take notes on their own. As he often did when having students take notes, Mr. Abati went on to project one student’s notes onto the board and read them to the class while

stressing what he wanted students to remember. In narrating *Brown*, Mr. Abati continued to provide a sanitized depiction of school segregation:

This person has three major things that I wanted us to get at. *Brown versus the Board of Education* was actually a specific court case. So in 1950 an all-white school in Topeka, Kansas refused to admit a little girl named Linda Brown. Linda Brown lived seven blocks away from an all-white school called the Sumner school, but she lived an hour and twenty minutes from her all Black school, and so her father decided to file a lawsuit. I think if you were a parent you would probably do the same thing...And so honestly, even though there was a highly racial component to this, it was also a common sense component. How could you send a student to a school that's an hour and twenty minutes away and that's the only school they can go to when there's a school that's seven blocks away? So her father filed a lawsuit because it challenged segregation.

One key way Mr. Abati trivialized the issue of school segregation was by failing to address the role of racism. In the excerpt above, Mr. Abati began by telling students a girl named Linda Brown was barred from enrolling in an all-white school. In doing so, though, Mr. Abati notably failed to explain *why* she was prevented from attending the all-white school. Mr. Abati then went on to point out that Linda Brown lived in closer proximity to the all-white school before arguing that “even though there was a highly racial component to [Brown], it was also a common sense component.” In the end, Mr. Abati spoke more critically about Linda not being able to go to a school she lived closer to than why Black and white students were required to attend separate schools or other factors that drove Blacks to fight for integrated schools such as their desire for better, more equitable resources. Mr. Abati's approach to teaching students about school segregation differed greatly from Sis. Shabazz's who not only talked about issues of equity and racism but explained that schools today are *still* segregated. In sum, Mr. Abati wanted his students to know that Black and white students were once legally kept from attending the same

schools but did not delve beyond the surface of this issue, nor suggest that schools including Smith are technically still segregated.

Another example of the way Mr. Abati downplayed Blacks' oppression can be seen in his lesson on the Great Depression (Fieldnotes, March 9, 2015). Mr. Abati wanted students to know the following three things:

1. What was the Great Depression?
2. What were two of the causes of the Great Depression?
3. How were African Americans affected by this time period?

As shown in the third question, Mr. Abati wanted students to know about Blacks' particular experiences during this time period. In practice, however, Mr. Abati spent more time explaining what the Great Depression was and the factors that led to it than on how Blacks were impacted. In the end, none of Mr. Abati's students were able to give an answer for the third question at the end of the lesson: "Did anybody have anything about how *Black* people were affected?" Mr. Abati asked. "What was the impact of this time period for African Americans if we were to add some quick notes?" When no one in the class was able to offer a response, Mr. Abati had students refer back to the section they read in their textbook--"Hard Times for Black America"--but students were still dubious. Seeing this, Mr. Abati decided to tell students what to put in their notes, which was that Blacks were laid off in large numbers in the North and that "it was bad in the North but worse in the South"; both of which Mr. Abati said contributed to the Great Migration. In sum, one of the goals of Mr. Abati's lesson was for students to know how the Great Depression impacted African Americans. In practice, however, Mr. Abati submerged this memory in favor of remembering what the nature and cause of the Great Depression. A quiz Mr.

Abati gave students three days in preparation for an upcoming benchmark assessment served as further evidence of how he overshadowed Blacks' struggles during this time period. Only one of the questions on the quiz pertained to the Great Depression, which read as follows:

Which of the following was not a cause of the Great Depression?

1. Disagreements between different political parties
2. Speculation in the years before the Great Depression
3. Banks collapsing when people tried to withdraw money
4. "Black Tuesday"

This question further demonstrates the ways in which Mr. Abati marginalized the hardships Blacks experienced during the Great Depression. Beyond preparing students for the upcoming benchmark assessment, this quiz served as a way to convey what is most important for students to remember about the Great Depression. This question suggests, then, that it was more important for students to recall what led to this historic event as opposed to knowing that the Great Depression unduly impacted African Americans. Sis. Shabazz talked to her students about the Great Depression as well but unlike Mr. Abati, Sis. Shabazz made the memory of Blacks' struggles much more salient. One day in class, for example, Sis. Shabazz asserted that Black people "had already been oppressed, depressed and economically challenged" long before the Great Depression and that this is why some Blacks believe President Roosevelt was more concerned with trying to help whites get out of poverty (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2015). Mr. Abati, by contrast, overshadowed the challenges Blacks faced by directing students' attention elsewhere.

Mr. Abati's presentation of the Buffalo Soldiers was perhaps one of the best illustrations of how he circumvented indepth discussions of Blacks' oppression. Mr. Abati talked about the historical significance of the Buffalo Soldiers in at least three different class periods. In each of these sessions, many students were fixated on one particular line from Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldiers" (Marley & Sporty, 1983), which students read from a print out of the lyrics Mr. Abati gave to them when introducing this topic (Fieldnotes, March 12, 2015). The line was part of a refrain and read, "Stolen from Africa, brought to America." Each time Mr. Abati asked the class to describe the "biggest legacy" of the Buffalo Soldiers or why they were important, at least one student would invariably allude to the fact that the Soldiers did not come to America willingly. Moreover, many were unable to grasp why, as Mr. Abati explained to them, the Buffalo Soldiers would fight Native Americans on behalf of whites. Mr. Abati gave students space to voice their questions and concerns about each issue. On the other hand, Mr. Abati kept redirecting the conversation back to what the Solders' accomplished rather than address notions of struggle that emerged throughout the song. The dialogue below reflects this pattern:

Mr. Abati: Overall, if I were to ask anybody in this classroom based on the song, do you think the Buffalo Soldiers were a positive or negative thing to Marley?

Student 1: Positive

Mr. Abati: Positive. And I think--would most of us agree with that, that yeah, they're positive? That's a pretty simplistic--wait, do most of us agree with that? Does anyone disagree that [the Buffalo Soldiers] were not positive?

Raquel: They were stolen from Africa. They didn't come here by choice.

Mr. Abati: That's an interesting point. So I think we can say on one hand the Buffalo Soldiers were positive because they were strong fighters but also there's some negativity because [their coming to America] was not a choice...But how does Marley see them? If you had to characterize how Marley sees the Buffalo Soldiers based on the lyrics of the song, what kind of things do you think he's

trying to say about the Buffalo Soldiers and who they were and what they were about?

Student 3: [Marley is] trying to say they're trying to fight.

Violet: He's saying that they were good people and they were fighting for others. Even though they may not have wanted to [fight], they were good people...

Mr. Abati: Excellent.

Although Mr. Abati invited students to critique the legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers, it was evident by the end of this dialogue that Mr. Abati did not want students to have a negative memory of the Soldiers. When Raquel noted that the Soldiers “didn’t come here by choice,” Mr. Abati affirmed her response but then followed up by asking how students would characterize the Soldiers based on Bob Marley’s lyrics. In doing so, Mr. Abati redirected the conversation to what he wanted students to remember, which was that the Soldiers were strong fighters. What struck me about Mr. Abati’s instructions--that is, for students to describe the Soldiers based on the song’s lyrics--was that Raquel’s impression of the Buffalo Soldiers *was* informed by the song. Her interpretation, however, apparently did not align with how Mr. Abati wanted students to think of the Soldiers, for he asked “but how does Marley see them?” By posing this question, Mr. Abati implied that Raquel’s conception of the Buffalo Soldiers was erroneous. Mr. Abati’s reaction to the latter two students, by contrast, was markedly different. In response to Mr. Abati’s follow-up question, the two students said Marley was conveying that the Soldiers were “trying to fight” and that “they were good people,” respectively. This time, Mr. Abati did not ask any additional questions or invite further critique. Instead, he simply said “excellent” and ended the discussion. In short, Mr. Abati’s initial inquiry was framed as an open-ended question, but in practice he wanted students to only remember the Soldiers’ legacy in a positive light. To be sure, Mr. Abati

continued to downplay Marley's references to injustice a few weeks later when reviewing for the cumulative African American history exam students would be taking at the end of the year (Fieldnotes, April 27, 2015). Mr. Abati responded as follows when Alice asserted that the Buffalo Soldiers "were taken from Africa and forced to fight in the U.S. military to protect whites from Native Americans":

Yes so they were taken from Africa, remember that wasn't literal. That was literal but they were *African* American who protected whites from Native Americans attacks. That's the basic gist of what I want you to know. Remember that their main role was to protect the white settlers as the whites moved onto Native American land and took over *their* land, story for another day. But the role of the Buffalo Soldiers was to protect the whites from Native American attacks. So I just want us to remember that. We'll have different like this one in the future. Thank you. So let's move onto the next thing.

Just as he did in his introductory lesson on the Buffalo Soldiers, Mr. Abati pivoted the conversation when Alice recalled less favorable aspects of the Soldiers' role in U.S. history according to Bob Marley's song. Mr. Abati accomplished this in two key ways. First, when paraphrasing Alice's answer, Mr. Abati undermined the memory Africans being taken from their homeland by reminding students that the Soldiers were *African* Americans and were therefore not literally stolen from Africa. Moreover, Mr. Abati omitted the part where Alice said the Buffalo Soldiers were "forced" to fight for whites. Second, Mr. Abati modified Alice's answer by adding that the Soldiers "protected" whites from Native American "attacks." I found Mr. Abati's addition of the word "attack" particularly striking because it depicted Native Americans as the perpetrators and whites as the victim. Mr. Abati acknowledged the irony of the Soldiers protecting whites who took over land that belonged to Native Americans but said it was a "story for another day." Mr. Abati explained in a post-course interview that this was his attempt at complicating the narrative within time constraints. "I think in that moment it was, honestly, do I

have the time to fully talk about this?” Mr. Abati said. “Perhaps not, but I don’t want it to just--I feel like that’s what’s on the [benchmark]” (Interview, July 3, 2015). Mr. Abati went on to add that even if he did decide to talk more critically about the Soldiers protecting whites from Native Americans, “I don’t want that to be the focus.” Thus, while it seems the benchmark bore some influence on how Mr. Abati talked about, or framed, the Buffalo Soldiers, it also appeared that Mr. Abati himself wanted to make the memory of the Soldiers’ accomplishments more prominent. Consistent with this, Mr. Abati repeated that the Soldiers “protected whites from Native American attacks” a total of three times and reiterated twice that this is all he wanted the students to remember.

In essence, while oppression was a focus of the class, Mr. Abati systematically shifted the students’ attention away from oppression and focused instead on extracting the “positives” from each historical incident.

Empowerment

Another major theme that emerged in Mr. Abati’s representation of Black history was the notion that Blacks had agency. In almost each lesson I observed, Mr. Abati spoke to students about the various ways Blacks individually and collectively fought for their basic civil and human rights. I refer to this trend as *empowerment*, as this was a term Mr. Abati repeatedly used in the African American history class. When sharing what his goals for student learning were that term, Mr. Abati said he aligned his expectations for student learning with the aforementioned themes. Consistent with this, Mr. Abati frequently incorporated the term “empowerment” into his lessons including instructing students to use this word in their class work. Readers may recall that Sis. Shabazz also portrayed Blacks as courageous and resilient. In contrast to Sis. Shabazz,

however, my findings indicate that Mr. Abati routinely submerged memories of Blacks' oppression in favor of remembering that Blacks took active strides to improve their condition. The primary means through which Mr. Abati accomplished this was by deflecting students' attention away from Blacks' struggles to how they responded to these challenges.

An example of how Mr. Abati privileged the memory of Black empowerment was when he prematurely ended a discussion on lynching in order to focus on the work of the NAACP. The objective, or desired outcomes, for this particular class was for students "to understand the beginnings, goals and accomplishments of the NAACP" (Fieldnotes, February 6, 2015). The topic of lynching arose at the beginning of class after students completed their warm-up activity. As a way to engage students in the day's lesson, Mr. Abati had students analyze two images that he projected onto the board. One of the images contained the words "NAACP" and "STOP LYNCHING." After giving students a few minutes to jot down their thoughts on what they thought the image was depicting, Mr. Abati asked if anyone in the class could define lynching. "[It was] when whites used to hang African Americans from a tree by their necks," a student replied. Mr. Abati subsequently fielded questions from students who wanted to know more about lynching, including Rashid "If a person is hung, but the tree branch breaks," Rashid asked, "can they get up and walk away?". To Mr. Abati's ire, the class erupted in laughter, prompting Mr. Abati to underscore the heinous nature of lynching. In doing so, though, Mr. Abati redirected the class' attention back to the NAACP:

[Lynching] was something that was public, it was *entertainment*. People took photos, they made post cards. Like there were postcards that were for sale...and people were like it was a form of entertainment. And it's not funny and that's why I'm like, even when a question sounds [silly] it's not funny. But let's bring it back though. We're going to talk about--not lynching today--but mostly about the

NAACP even though lynching was a big part of like what was going on at that time.

Here, Mr. Abati acknowledged that lynching was an important issue but ended the conversation to instead talk about the NAACP. Mr. Abati's response was in line with the lesson's objective, which was for students to know what the NAACP did for the Black community as opposed to the forces that drove the organization to take action. Moreover, the objective mirrored the unit's essential question--"What was the impact of anti-Black politics on Black empowerment?" which was part of the prepared curriculum. This question asks students to consider the challenges that impacted the Black community (e.g., "anti-Black politics") but only to contextualize examples of Black empowerment. In this lesson, for example, Mr. Abati used the topic of lynching as a segue to discussing the NAACP; the true focus of the lesson. As evidence, Mr. Abati did not talk about lynching for the remainder of class but rather on the beginnings, goals and accomplishments of the NAACP. Sis. Shabazz's treatment of lynching was dramatically different, who comparatively struck a greater balance between talking about the heinous nature of lynching and the ways Blacks worked to end this practice. Finally, it is worth noting that Mr. Abati's lesson on the NAACP was part of a unit titled, "Standing up for the Community." This is significant because, as Mr. Abati shared in class, the term "anti-Black politics" referred to the Jim Crow era. Thus, even the name of the unit privileged the memory of Black empowerment while obscuring the memory of Blacks' oppression.

For each remaining lesson in this unit, Mr. Abati deflected from the severity of Blacks' oppression in order to convey the message that Blacks took active strides in fighting for justice. In teaching students about *Plessy v. Ferguson*, for instance, Mr. Abati spent the majority of class discussing how Homer Plessy assisted in efforts to challenge segregation in lieu of exploring the

notion of white supremacy (Fieldnotes, January 30, 2015). Similar to his lesson on the NAACP, Mr. Abati began class by having students analyze an image related to the day's topic. This time he showed two water fountains, one for whites and the other for Blacks. While the white fountain was pristine, ornate and surrounded by flowers, the Black fountain was an old water pump covered in weeds. The caption under the fountains read, "separate does not mean equal." In response to Mr. Abati asking students to analyze the image, Raquel suggested it reflected white superiority. Her comment, however went unexamined by Mr. Abati:

Raquel: Whites were treated like they were kings and queens because of the angels on the fountain while Blacks had to work for what they want[ed]. Their water comes up automatically. If we wanted to get something to drink, we had to pump for it...It comes easier for white people.

Mr. Abati: I think we're making good inferences, but I want to go back to the part where it says separate but not equal. Going back to what Sarah said earlier, even though both whites and Blacks had fountains, there was still inequality. They were not equal.

Mr. Abati affirmed Raquel's response but instead of interrogating her assertion, Mr. Abati wanted students to only know that Blacks and whites had separate, unequal facilities. This was done deliberately, as the objective was for students to understand how *Plessy v. Ferguson* "impacted African American empowerment." By the end of the lesson, Mr. Abati had taught students that a man named Homer Plessy rode in the white section of a railroad car in an attempt to overturn laws requiring separate public facilities. It was therefore essential for students to recall, as Mr. Abati noted above, that facilities for Blacks and whites were "separate but not equal" so it would match the story's resolution. This helps to explain why Mr. Abati did not interrogate Raquel's assertion that "whites were treated like they were kings and queens" while "Blacks had to work" for what they wanted for if he had, it would have undermined what Mr. Abati wanted students to

take away from this lesson. In short, Mr. Abati's objective was for students to know that Homer Plessy challenged racial discrimination, not to go into depth about the ways Blacks were mistreated or why.

The following class, Mr. Abati presented a lesson on Booker T. Washington in which he continued to foreground the memory of Black empowerment by marginalizing the degree of Blacks' struggles (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2015). Washington was one of three individuals Mr. Abati presented in separate lessons as examples of African American leaders that emerged during the Jim Crow era. (The other two were Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois). To contextualize Washington's activism, Mr. Abati reminded students that *Plessy v. Ferguson* resulted in the Supreme Court ruling whites and Blacks "were separate but not equal" and that "African Americans were firmly in this era called the *Jim Crow* era." According to the stated objective, the goal was for students to "understand and explain Booker T. Washington's views on African American empowerment." In line with this goal, Mr. Abati continuously deflected away from talking about the hardships Washington experienced to how he demonstrated strength and agency. While debriefing on a short clip about Washington, for example, Mr. Abati acknowledged that Washington faced many struggles--e.g., he grew up as a slave, his father was a slave owner and he was very poor--but refocused the conversation back to the notion of empowerment by asking, "but did anyone get to how he thought Black people would become successful?" His question revealed that he was more concerned about remembering Washington's views on empowerment than his struggles. This became more evident when Mr. Abati had students take notes on Washington from their textbook. Each time Mr. Abati had

students take notes in class, he would tell students what specific information he wanted them to record. His instructions today were as follows:

I'm going to put it this way. Anti-Black politics is this whole time period that we're in. So Black people were not being treated well by the government. Black people felt that they didn't have any power. You don't actually have to take notes on that today. What I *do* want you to take notes on about is how did Booker T. Washington think that African Americans would get empowerment? So your whole notes for today is, you're trying to figure out how Booker T. Washington thought African Americans would get empowerment. So that's the *only* thing I want you to be reading for. Anything that talks about Booker T. Washington and how he thought Black people would get power and respect.

Here, Mr. Abati made clear that he only wanted students to know, as he put it, "how did Booker T. Washington think that African American would get empowerment?". Indeed, after telling students that Blacks were being mistreated by the government and felt they did not have any power, Mr. Abati tells his students that they "don't actually have to take notes on that today." He then went onto state three times that "the *only* thing" he wants them to document is Washington's views on how Blacks "would get power and respect." In doing so, Mr. Abati set very clear boundaries for what he wanted his students to recall about Washington. To further help shape this memory, Mr. Abati instructed students at the end of class to write a short explanation of what Washington wanted African Americans to do and to include the term 'empowerment' in their response. In juxtaposing Sis. Shabazz and Mr. Abati's historical narratives, the former did the opposite of Mr. Abati; that is, Sis. Shabazz spoke in greater detail about the tribulations Black people experienced during the Jim Crow era as well as how Blacks challenged these laws.

In sum, Mr. Abati stressed the various ways Blacks individually and collectively fought for their basic civil and human rights. In doing so, however, Mr. Abati routinely submerged

memories of Blacks' oppression in favor of having students remember that Blacks took active strides to challenge racism and discrimination.

Victory

This third and final theme build on the other two to produce a distinctively triumphant narrative of African American history. Nearly every lesson began with Mr. Abati introducing a form of oppression Blacks experienced, which I argued he had a tendency to trivialize. Following this, Mr. Abati would explain what Blacks did to challenge the injustice of focus (e.g. school segregation), which led the memory of Blacks' oppression to be overshadowed. From here, Mr. Abati would segue into what Blacks achieved as a result of their efforts. In this way, essentially presented each lesson as a "celebratory tale" (Thomas, 2012) that had a clear beginning, middle and end. Consequently by the end of the year, Mr. Abati had conveyed that Blacks were successful in securing most, if not all, of their civil rights.

Mr. Abati's lesson on military desegregation is illustrative of the plot I described above. By the end of class, Mr. Abati wanted his students to be able to describe the causes of military desegregation and explain Executive Order 9981 (Fieldnotes, March 19, 2015). Mr. Abati began by having students recall what segregation was as a segue to talking about military desegregation. Together, Mr. Abati and his students established that segregation referred to when different races were separated. "Blacks and whites were separate," said Mr. Abati. "Physically separated but even activity wise, they weren't really allowed to intermingle and like do the same things." From here, Mr. Abati proceeded to have students consider what "*desegregation*" meant so they would have some understanding of what military desegregation referred to. He subsequently delivered a lecture on what led to desegregation in the armed forces:

First and foremost we know there was an elite group of Black pilots called the Tuskegee Airmen who showed that African Americans could be elite pilots...In addition, there were other African Americans who were fighting during this time period and many different African Americans who were protesting segregation in the military...So there was a lot of pressure going on. So after World World II ended, there was a new president, President Truman, and so African Americans were pressuring President Truman to stop segregation in the military.

This excerpt contains the first two elements of the aforementioned oppression, empowerment, victory plot structure. After reminding students about the pioneering role of the Tuskegee Airmen, Mr. Abati pointed out that the U.S. military was still segregated (e.g., oppression) and that many African Americans pressured President Truman to end this practice (e.g., empowerment). After concluding his remarks above, Mr. Abati had students read and summarize a handout on Executive Order 9981. As he often did, Mr. Abati then reviewed what he wanted students to have in their notes:

Mr. Abati: So President Truman orders equality of treatment in the armed services [on the board he writes ‘Truman orders equality of treatment...in the armed services’]. Meaning what? Sarah, what does this mean?

Sarah: Equality in the armed forces mean that nobody of race, color, religion, or no matter how you is, shouldn’t be treated differently...

Mr. Abati: Blacks and whites, and Asians and Latinos, Native Americans all have the same rights as anybody else in the army. [He writes ‘no one should be unequal’ on the board].

Mr. Abati: How fast was this supposed to happen? Like did [President Truman] say immediately, in five years? What language did he use?

Student 2 [in a soft voice]: As rapidly as possible [direct quote from the handout]

Mr. Abati: As rapidly as possible. What is [this phrase] saying?

[No one responds]

Mr. Abati: This should happen asap but gives time for change.

By reviewing what notes students should have taken from the handout, Mr. Abati exerted influence over what and how students should remember about military desegregation. As shown above, Mr. Abati concluded his lesson on military desegregation by telling students that President Truman passed a law ordering “equality of treatment in the armed forces” and that this should occur “as rapidly as possible.” There was no further discussion about what occurred after the President signed Executive Order 9981, nor the extent to which this law effectively ended segregation in the military. Instead, Mr. Abati simply said that the President gave “time for change.” By the end of class, then, Mr. Abati portrayed Blacks as being successful in eliminating racial prejudice in the military, which aligned with the lesson’s objective of having students be able to explain the purpose and results of Executive Order 9981.

Approximately one month after Mr. Abati taught students how the military became desegregated, he began a new unit on the Civil Rights Movement. Nearly every lesson contained the three major themes present in his overall representation of African American history-- oppression, empowerment and victory. An example of this was Mr. Abati’s lesson on Bloody Sunday. In the previous class session, Mr. Abati told students that the March on Washington banned segregation and “basically got rid of Jim Crow” (Fieldnotes, April 27, 2015). In teaching students about Bloody Sunday, he now wanted students to understand “the causes, events and impact” of this historical event (Fieldnotes, April 28, 2015). Consistent with this lesson’s objective, Mr. Abati delivered a lecture in which he described what led up to Bloody Sunday and its outcome. Connecting back to what they discussed the day before, Mr. Abati reminded students that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned segregation. What it did not do, he continued,

was eliminate voting rights discrimination. Below was how Mr. Abati proceeded to narrate the events that took place on Bloody Sunday:

Bloody Sunday was basically this: As the protesters went over the Pettus Bridge and prepared to march on the highway to Montgomery, Alabama, they were met by uniformed state police. The state police warned them, told them to go back [but] the protesters stayed where they were and once that happened it was basically open fire...This was all over the news everywhere, the fact that these peaceful protesters were being trampled by the police because they wanted to march for the right to vote...But due to *this* event, subsequent following marches that happened because they refused to stop as well as the *death* of yet another person who this time happened to be white, what happened was that the President felt the pressure to put some laws into place to address this issue. And that's why as a result of Bloody Sunday, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed into law [and] it's pretty clear what it did. What it did was it guaranteed African Americans the right to vote and protected their right to vote and made sure that *everybody* could vote *legally*.

Thus, Mr. Abati characterized Bloody Sunday as a neatly packaged story with a beginning, middle and end. First, he identified what injustice Blacks were fighting against. For this Mr. Abati explained that although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned segregation, Blacks were still being denied the right to vote. He subsequently described how Blacks demonstrated empowerment, or what Blacks did to challenge this injustice. Here, Mr. Abati said that protesters marched peacefully over the Pettus Bridge during which they were violently suppressed by the police. The third and final component of this story was the outcome of Blacks' efforts. According to Mr. Abati, the result of Blacks being attacked for demanding their right to vote was that it led to the Voting Rights of 1965, which "guaranteed African Americans the right to vote and protected their right to vote and made sure that everybody could vote legally." In contrast to Sis. Shabazz who expounded on the ways past forms of oppression continue into present day, Mr. Abati portrayed Blacks as having been mostly victorious in eradicating historical forms of

racism. In this case, Mr. Abati wanted students to remember that the significance of Bloody Sunday was that Blacks successfully secured the right to vote.

In addition to teaching students how Blacks helped to end racial segregation in the United States, Mr. Abati maintained that Blacks worked to end a similar system of oppression abroad. This occurred during a unit on the Black Power era--titled "Empowerment and Racial Identity"--in which Mr. Abati provided instruction on the Black Panther Party, Malcolm X, the Black Student Movement, and apartheid. It was the latter in which Mr. Abati explained how Blacks ended racial segregation in South Africa. After showing a short video clip of anti-apartheid demonstrations, Mr. Abati gave a lecture on what apartheid was and some of the strategies Blacks employed to dismantle this system including divestment:

This strategy [of divestment] basically worked because...it made it so people didn't want to do business with South Africa and eventually *one* major law was passed that made it so that a lot of pressure was put on South Africa. I want you to write this down. [It was] the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986...When South Africa realized that they were gonna be broke because nobody would trade with them and nobody would do business with them, it really really made it hard for them to continue [the system of apartheid]. As a result of this, Nelson Mandela was released from prison after more than 20 years in prison in 1990. And eventually apartheid ended when he became President in 1994, which signified a new era in South Africa where there was no longer any official segregation. Okay. So that's the end of our notes right there.

Although the objective of this lesson was for students to understand the nature of apartheid, in practice Mr. Abati wanted his students to know that Blacks helped to end apartheid in South Africa. To accomplish this, he first established the context in which this victory was achieved, which was the specific form of oppression Blacks were struggling against. Prior to what he said above, he had helped students see the similarities between apartheid and racial segregation here in the United States. Next, Mr. Abati highlighted the different strategies Blacks used to end

apartheid, one of which was divestment. He said this strategy was effective because it eventually led to Nelson Mandela being released from prison and that apartheid was dismantled when he became President. At Kuumba, Sis. Shabazz also talked to her students about apartheid but in very different ways. Although she told students about the protests that took place, Sis. Shabazz never contended that apartheid was eradicated. Moreover, Sis. Shabazz suggested that the United States was complicit in upholding the system of apartheid in South Africa. She did this by explaining that President Reagan threatened to veto any bill that sanctioned American companies for conducting business in South Africa because it would take away from American profits (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2015). In short, Mr. Abati's portrayal of apartheid mirrored his tendency to represent Black history as a story of triumph in which Blacks successfully eliminated almost all historical forms of racism, while Sis. Shabazz portrayed Black history as an ongoing struggle.

Conclusion

In sum, an examination of Mr. Abati's instructional practices, discourse and curricular materials revealed that he portrayed African American history as a story of triumph. My definition of *triumph* has been influenced by literacy scholar Ebony Thomas' "The Next Chapter of Our Story: Rethinking African American Metanarratives in School and Society" (2012). According to Thomas, this interpretation of African American history depicts Blacks as being "active agents fighting for their own physical, social, and economic liberation from stifling oppression" (p. 7). This narrative thus consists of celebratory stories of what Blacks have achieved in the face of insurmountable obstacles. My findings aligned with what Mr. Abati enjoyed most about teaching the African American history class; specifically, having his students

“become more confident in realizing African Americans are an integral part of America” and realize “that Black people have accomplished a lot” (Interview, March 20, 2015).

Mr. Abati’s triumphant portrayal of African American history consisted of three themes. The first of these was *oppression*, which refers to the trials and tribulations Blacks experienced throughout U.S. history. My findings showed that though Mr. Abati and Sis. Shabazz both presented students with various examples of past hardships, the former tended to submerge this memory by avoiding in-depth discussion of Blacks’ struggles.

The latter two themes help to explain why Mr. Abati spoke little about Blacks’ oppression. First, the notion of *empowerment* was prominently featured through Mr. Abati’s instruction. In almost each lesson I observed, Mr. Abati spoke to students about the various ways Blacks individually and collectively fought for their basic civil and human rights. Readers may recall that Sis. Shabazz also portrayed Blacks as courageous and resilient. In contrast to Sis. Shabazz, however, Mr. Abati emphasized Blacks’ agency by overshadowing Blacks’ struggles. The primary means through which he did this was by deflecting attention away from Blacks’ struggles to instead impress upon students that Blacks worked relentlessly to combat racism and discrimination.

Lastly, I provided an analysis of the third major theme that emerged through Mr. Abati’s presentation of African American history: *victory*. That is, almost each of Mr. Abati’s lessons highlighted some form of achievement. Ultimately, I found that the majority of Mr. Abati’s lessons contained each of these three themes. In this way, Mr. Abati essentially framed each lesson as a triumphant story with a clear beginning, middle and end.

In the next chapter, I will present my findings for Smith student participants' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience and discuss the ways in which their understandings were shaped by Mr. Abati's historical narrative.

CHAPTER 7

**SMITH STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORICAL AND
CONTEMPORARY BLACK EXPERIENCE**

I guess whites just thought they were better than Blacks. - Brittany

All my heroes got a criminal case. - Sarah

I just like that we have more freedom now. - Violet

I hate to say this, but we startin' to make everything seem like it's about race. - Robert

In this chapter I present findings from the eight students who participated in this study from Smith. With there being 25 students enrolled in the section I observed, I once again hoped for a minimum of 12 participants, or half the number of students in the course. This also proved to be a challenge, however, mostly due to students forgetting to bring their consent forms back to school. There were eight participants in all and consisted of two male and six female students. In alphabetical order, the participants were Asia, Alice, Brittany, Rashid, Raquel, Robert, Sarah, and Violet.

My findings revealed that Smith students had a very different experience learning about from those at Kuumba. Whereas Kuumba students collectively portrayed African American history as a continuity narrative, or ongoing struggle, the participants at Smith largely characterized Black history as a story of *triumph*. That is, the participants expressed that most forms of racism and discrimination had successfully been eradicated by their ancestors. Their conception of the Black experience corresponded with Mr. Abati's representation of African

American history who also presented a triumphant narrative. In this chapter I explicate four themes that merged to create this triumphant narrative, which I have divided into two sections. First, I present two themes that emerged in students' understanding of the historical Black experience--*struggle* and *resistance and achievements*. In the subsequent section I present students' perception of the contemporary Black *experience--victory* and *cultural deficit*. Through an examination of fieldnotes and interview data, the purpose of this chapter is to show that Mr. Abati's privileging and silencing of particular memories shaped student participants' collective memory of the past, which in turn informed students' interpretations of the present day Black experience.

Smith students' Understanding of the Historical Black Experience

On the surface, there does not seem to be much contrast between Kuumba and Smith students' collective memory of the past. Analysis of fieldnotes and interview data revealed distinct difference between the two groups' conception of the past. First, Smith participants' portrayal of Blacks' historical struggles was overwhelmingly episodic. Whereas at Kuumba the student participants remembered oppression as persisting from one era to the next and evolving in form (e.g., explicit to implicit), the majority of students at Smith tended to compartmentalize Blacks struggles into particular time frames; namely, slavery and the Civil Rights era. Students' memory of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras was much more difficult for students to access. Thus for many, the Reconstruction and Jim Crow era were 'forgotten' eras precluded from their memory. When I asked participants to describe Blacks' experiences during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, most struggled to respond, claimed that they "forgot" what happened or

provided erroneous information. When describing her understanding of Reconstruction, for example, Sarah explained that whites came to realize the error of their ways.

A second distinct difference between Kuumba and Smith's understanding of the past is that Smith students remembered past forms of resistance as being distinctively 'violent' and 'non-violent.' Moreover, students overwhelmingly expressed favorable perceptions of the former strategy which they associated with the Civil Rights Movement while denouncing 'violent' methods of activism used during the Black Power era. Kuumba students, on the other hand, did not demarcate one type of activism from another. In addition, they expressed a much more positive memory of the Black Power era than did Smith students.

In what follows I present excerpts from fieldnotes and interview data to illustrate these differences in memory and how they aligned with Mr. Abati's presentation of African American history.

Struggle. Similar to the student participants at Kuumba, a dominant theme that emerged in Smith students' understanding of the historical Black experience was that people of African ancestry were an oppressed group. In sharing what they remembered learning in Mr. Abati's African American history class, all of the respondents talked about the various ways Blacks were subjugated. From being stolen and transported to America, to working laborious hours in the cotton fields, to being beaten, jailed and discriminated against, the students could hardly conceive what it must have been like to live through those experiences let alone survive them. It perhaps should not come as a surprise, then, that many students reported feeling anger, hurt or both in response to learning about the obstacles Blacks had to contend with in the past. In this way, Smith and Kuumba's memory of the past was quite similar. There was one important way,

however, that Smith's conception of Blacks' hardships differed from Kuumba students, which had to do with the duration of these challenges.

With regards to duration, Smith students compartmentalized Blacks' past struggles into select periods. Readers may recall that in addition to sharing what they learned in the African American history class overall, each student participant was asked to describe what they learned in the class with regards to six specific time periods. These were pre-enslavement, slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Analysis of the latter--that is, Smith students' recollections of what was taught about each historical era--revealed that they collectively had the impression that Blacks went through alternate cycles of progress and struggle. Sarah, for example, explained that Reconstruction was when "white people had changed. I thought they was like--oh yeah. Like I just realized how I was treatin' this person bad. Like what if that was me?" Her recollection of Jim Crow, on the other hand, was that whites did not want Blacks and whites socializing with one another. When I asked if she could explain why whites' treatment of Blacks changed after Reconstruction, Sarah's response was that "somebody else done brainwashed them" (Interview, May 22, 2015). Overall, Smith students' memory of past challenges were confined to two primary time periods.

One period Smith respondents felt was particularly difficult for Black people was slavery. Overall, the students mostly recalled that Africans were bought and stolen from their homeland, forced to work long hours picking cotton, subjected to harsh beatings and dehumanized. As an example, Sarah explained to me that whites took Blacks "from their homeland and brought them here to not only make them work like animals but treat them as if they weren't human, as if God just brought them down here for them just to be here" (Interview, May 2, 2015). Salient for

Brittany, too, was how whites treated Blacks as a commodity to be bought and sold. Reflecting on this made Brittany feel unsettled:

To me, what happened during slavery, it doesn't make sense to me. Like why buy a person, another person? I don't know. I guess whites just thought they were better than Blacks. And I don't know because if it was the other way around, 'cause sometimes I do think about it, like what if Blacks had whites as slaves? That's the confusing part, like, I don't really know.

Sarah and Brittany were not alone in surmising that whites' treatment of Blacks stemmed from notions of white supremacy. Violet also believed this was why whites felt empowered to oppress people of African ancestry. "I learned a lot about slavery," Violet remarked. "I know that whites...wanted to feel better about themselves and so they treated others that were not their color differently, made them feel like they were slaves, and treated them as slaves." As with Sarah and Brittany, Violet believed whites enslaved people "that were not their color" because they considered themselves to be superior.

Related to this, some students contended that resistance was not an option. Alice, Racquel and Asia gave nearly identical responses as to why Blacks did not challenge whites' authority.

The conversation I had with Racquel below was representative of this group (Interview, May 29, 2015):

LR: What do you remember learning about slavery in this class?

Racquel: I remember that they took African Americans from Africa, brought them here and forced them to work. And if they didn't work, then they would get beat, killed, raped and everything like that. They would make them work out in the fields and long hours and everything like that.

LR: Can you specify who 'they' is?

Raquel: White people.

Raquel's memory of slavery reflected the group's collective conception of this time period. What she took away from the African American history class was that whites brought African Americans to America and forced to work against their will. The preceding dialogue illustrates how some students, such as Raquel, further recounted that Blacks would be punished if they attempted to rebel.

Although the majority of students depicted whites as the oppressor, two students were fixated on having learned that Africans played a key role the slave trade. One of these students was Robert. When describing what he liked about the African American history class, Robert said he enjoyed learning about West Africa and in particular how "Black people would trade their own...for like supplies--guns, food [and] stuff like that" (Interview, May 15, 2015). He claimed to find this interesting because it is "hard to forget" something like "Black people tradin' their own." Rashid also talked about Blacks' involvement in slavery when discussing what he liked about taking the African American history course that year (Interview, May 18, 2015):

LR: What are your general thoughts about the African American history class?

Rashid: It's a really good class.

LR: Why do you think so?

Rashid: Because I learn a lot of stuff in there pretty much everyday, so I can't be like, oh I don't learn nothin' in this class because I actually learned a lot more than I have in the past few years.

LR: Is there anything that stands out as something you didn't know before?

Rashid: Mainly like the slave trades. I mean I knew about it, but I didn't know like the different types of, or variations of it where Blacks would ship other Blacks off for weapons and arms. I didn't know that.

Rashid alluded to Blacks' culpability in the slave trade again when explaining how he was emotionally impacted by the new knowledge he acquired about slavery: "I kind of felt bad and then I kinda felt wrong," Rashid said, "[Y]our own brothers would trade you for money and they would trade you for weapons and clothes and stuff. It'd be wrong because you just betrayed a

whole person and you just set up the future for Black people.” Learning that “Blacks would ship other Blacks” clearly left an impression on Rashid as he brought this up on multiple occasions during the interview.

After slavery, the next time period students recalled Blacks being engaged in an active struggle was during the Civil Rights Movement. Their narratives of the Civil Rights Movement evoked images of Blacks coming together to fight for justice and equality; yet also salient for many students was the memory of Black protestors being jailed, beaten and killed because of their activism. In sharing their understanding of the modern Civil Rights Movement, several participants drew from the video clips Mr. Abati showed in class throughout the Civil Rights unit. Brittany’s response was reflective of this trend:

I do know for a fact because I watched the Children’s Crusade march...Mr. Abati taught us [that] the youngest child that was in that childrens march that got locked up was four years old, and they would tell the kids to say they were 17 to get a point across. But the president, I think it was Kennedy, he called and they made a deal. The police and Martin Luther King made a deal saying if you stop shootin’ and get your dogs and stuff we’ll stop sending our kids. Give us freedom. If not we’ll keep sending out the kids and this will just keep happening. Kennedy saw what was going on and he made them stop, and he signed the law that all Blacks should be free and stuff like that. So I mean, they was pretty successful to me with that one.

Here, Brittany asserts she knows “for a fact” the specific incidents that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement because of video they watched about the Children’s Crusade as well as what Mr. Abati told them about these events. In this way, Brittany perceived the video and Mr. Abati as sources of historical truth. Indeed, there were striking similarities between the way Brittany talked about this time period and what Mr. Abati said about the Children’s Crusade in class. Specifically, Mr. Abati said that what made this movement so effective was that it involved children. He said it was a universal belief that it was wrong to hit children and yet people were

seeing images on television of children being attacked by dogs, hosed and beaten. Students also saw some of the images shown in the clip in an accompanying packet in which they were asked to write what they thought was the main idea of each image (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2015).

In sum, Smith student participants collectively remembered the historical Black experience as being replete with trials and tribulations. In this way, Smith and Kuumba students' understandings were similar. The primary difference between the two groups, however, was that Smith students compartmentalized Blacks' past struggles into select periods. The Smith participants associated other historical periods with empowerment or had little recollection of them.

Strength and achievements. Another key message Smith participants gleaned from Mr. Abati's class was that Blacks were courageous, selfless and resilient in the face of extreme obstacles. Rather than helpless victims, the students depicted Blacks as actors and survivors. It is an aspect of Black history that convinced Sarah of the importance of teaching about the historical Black experience in school. She did not just want to learn about how "Martin Luther King marched up Selma, Rosa Parks didn't get off of the bus, they went to talk to the President [and] so that's why [Blacks are] not segregated no more." Instead, Sarah expressed an appreciation for learning more about the degree of courage and sacrifice it required for her ancestors to effect change: "All my heroes got a criminal case. Like everyone of them been in jail, and I wanna know, like, so she just going to jail because of her color? No, she went to jail because of what she *did*" (Interview, May 22, 2015). It seems, then, that Sarah found it meaningful to learn that her "heroes" actively challenged their oppression rather than simply being victims of prejudice.

Sarah's memory of King and Park "having a criminal case" mirrored many of the lessons Mr. Abati taught during a unit on the Civil Rights Movement. In one lesson for instance, Mr. Abati taught the class about the significance of Birmingham and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2015). Mr. Abati explained to the class that they would be "talking about what happened in Birmingham and [Martin Luther King's] famous letter from a Birmingham jail." He then proceeded to play a one minute video clip of King reading his letter and asked the class afterwards to write a short summary of what they thought was happening at this time in history given the images displayed during the clip. As he often did when assigning classwork, Mr. Abati asked for volunteers to share what they wrote in their notes. Sarah and two other students, Rashid and Brittany, raised their hands to respond. Instead of responding to Mr. Abat's question, each fixated on the images they saw in the clip. Rashid and Brittany said they saw King being arrested and his mugshot picture, respectively. Meanwhile, what stood out for Sarah was the image of the police putting King in their car, King in a jail cell, and there being "a lot of people" in jail with him, all of whom were Black. Thus, what stood out most for these three students was seeing the consequences experienced by King and other Black activists in their efforts to challenge systems of oppression.

This finding challenges what Orlando Patterson (1971) referred to as a *catastrophic* interpretation of Black history. According to Patterson, those ascribing to this view perceive the historical Black experience as "a chronicle of horrors" (p. 299). Absent from Patterson's catastrophic interpretation of Black history are the ways Blacks resisted their oppression. That Blacks encountered innumerable trials was certainly a salient part of Smith students' memory, but they were also keenly aware of the agency Blacks possessed. As a result, students like

Brittany came to realize that “our ancestors...were strong people” (Interview, June 1, 2015).

Robert and Racquel also remarked on the strength Blacks displayed throughout history. “We’re strong,” Racquel said. “Like all the way back from slavery and everybody that worked for us to get to where we are now” (Interview, May 29, 2015). Similarly, Robert said he learned that “Black people are stronger than I thought. You know, that we [have] been through all that but we are still here” (Interview, May 15, 2015). It seemed, then, that learning about the degree trauma Blacks endured was an affirming experience for students.

Along with remembering that Blacks worked together to demand justice, many Smith student participants made a clear distinction between ‘non-violent’ and ‘violent’ forms of protest and believed the former a more effective political strategy. When describing what they learned about the Civil Rights Movement in the African American history class, all of the student participants evoked images of Blacks working together to bring about change through marching, lunch counter sit-ins and passive resistance. For instance Robert maintained that Blacks protested “peacefully,” (Interview, May 15, 2015) while Racquel and Asia brought up how Blacks “didn’t fight back” (Interview, May 29, 2015) and stood up for themselves “without violence,” (Interview, June 3, 2015) respectively. The vast majority of student participants contended that using non-violence helped Blacks to successfully get most if not all of their demands met. One of these students was Alice who described the Civil Rights Movement as when “positive and negative groups...used non-violence and violence to try to get their point across” (Interview, June 9, 2015). She proceeded to explain why she preferred the former strategy:

‘Cause...when they was being violent, they wasn’t gettin’ nothin but beat up more and put in jail. When they was non-violent, they just let the cops beat on them and that actually got some of them their rights.

Here, Alice remembers “positive” groups as those that were “non-violent” and “negative” groups as “violent.” According to Alice’s recollection, Blacks were assaulted regardless of the type of tactic they used to advocate for change but that non-violence proved to be more fruitful. Indeed, Alice gleaned that Blacks accomplished more when “they just let the cops beat on them.”

The participants’ conception of the Civil Rights Movement as a largely successful movement paralleled Mr. Abati’s depiction of this era. Nearly every lesson Mr. Abati taught in his unit on the Civil Rights Movement began with a specific challenge Blacks encountered, followed by an explanation of how the Black community individually or collectively worked together to overcome this challenge and ended with Mr. Abati highlighting what Blacks gained as a result of their efforts. Virtually each lesson, then, was a “celebratory tale” (Thomas, 2012) and by students’ accounts, successful in eliminating most forms of racism.

This plot structure framed Mr. Abati’s narrative on the meaning and significance of *Brown versus the Board of Education*. The objective of this particular lesson was for students to “understand how *Brown versus the Board of Education* was an important movement in the greater Civil Rights Movement” (Fieldnotes, April 7, 2015). Mr. Abati began the lesson by helping the class to identify the issue that led to the Supreme Court case. In this case, it was school segregation. To accomplish this, Mr. Abati showed the class a short video clip on the story of Ruby Bridges. He instructed the class to summarize what they saw and then asked students to analyze an image he projected onto the board. In it, a women sits next to a little girl and is

holding a newspaper with the caption, “HIGH COURT BANS SEGREGATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS” in large bold capital letters.

Mr. Abati affirmed Sarah’s speculation that the above is an image of a mother and her daughter on the steps of the Supreme Court where they went to challenge school segregation. “Okay, so Sarah kind of put that right there,” Mr. Abati replied “That *is* what we’re going to talk about today. We are going to talk about *Brown versus the Board of Education*, which *was* a court decision that enabled blacks and whites to attend the same schools legally and it *did* stop unfair practices for black children.” Here Mr. Abati clearly indicates that segregated schooling ended after *Brown*.

Next, the class read and took notes from a section in their textbook that explained how Blacks fought to dismantle the system of school segregation and what resulted from their efforts. When Mr. Abati had students take notes, he often selected at least one student’s notes to share with the class, often weaving in his own remarks along the way. The following excerpt is how Mr. Abati paraphrased one student’s notes:

This person has three major things that I wanted us to get at. *Brown versus the Board of Education* was actually a specific court case. So in 1950 an all-white school in Topeka, Kansas refused to admit a little girl named Lynda Brown...So her father filed a lawsuit [which] reached the Supreme Court. Lynda became the main plaintiff in this case and the Supreme Court declared that laws mandating public school segregation were unconstitutional.

Mr. Abati’s narration of this student’s notes included each component of the plot structure I outlined earlier. Indeed, there were “three major things” Mr. Abati wanted his students to know about the *Brown* case. The first thing is the problem that led up to the case; specifically, that a little girl named Lynda Brown was prohibited from enrolling in a nearby (white) school because she was Black. Next, Mr. Abati directed students’ attention to what course action was taken to

challenge this injustice. In this case, Mr. Abati explained that Lynda's father filed a lawsuit. The final layer of the plot structure was the outcome that was achieved. In concluding the story of *Brown*, Mr. Abati explained that the lawsuit Lynda's father filed had reached the Supreme Court, which ultimately declared segregated schooling unconstitutional. Equally noteworthy, if not more, about the way Mr. Abati talked about the *Brown* case was that he downplayed the significance of race. Mr. Abati acknowledged that there was a "highly racial component" of the case but redirected the class' attention to the "common sense" element, which was that the all-white school was closer than the all-Black school.

Mr. Abati reiterated this plot structure in three subsequent class sessions when the topic of segregated schools arose. For instance three days after the aforementioned lesson, Mr. Abati reviewed *Brown* by asking students to answer three questions: 1) The "issue" behind *Brown* versus the Board of Education 2) how the Supreme Court became involved and 3) how the Supreme Court ruled in the case. In effect, Mr. Abati's questions served as a way to reinforce the narrative he presented to students about *Brown* days earlier (Fieldnotes, April 9, 2015), which is that Blacks successfully ended the practice of school segregation. Mr. Abati's framing of *Brown* was representative of how he presented the remaining topics in this unit.

The Smith participants' understanding of the Black Power movement, on the other hand, was quite the opposite of how they remembered the Civil Rights era. While all of the students portrayed the Black Power era as a time of activism, they frequently described the methods Blacks used as "violent" or "militant." Moreover, most of the students came to a similar conclusion as Alice did above--that Blacks were more successful when they exercised non-

violence than when they used so-called violent tactics. Students like Sarah were especially critical of the strategies Blacks employed during this era:

My understanding of them is that they was crazy. To be honest, they was crazy. Martin Luther King accomplished a lot just by being quiet. He accomplished so much just by sayin' nothin'...Martin Luther King said to the kids, y'all go in the sit-ins, don't say nothin' to nobody, don't talk to nobody, nothin' just sit there (taps on desk for emphasis). Just sit there. Now, Ms. Lina, I can sit down and get served because of Martin Luther King's quietness. Now Malcolm X thinkin' of 'Oh, I'm tired of being quiet! How about we just start fightin them back?' [If I did that] where would I be right now? Six feet under the ground. so it don't make no sense (Interview, May 22, 2015).

Sarah went on to assert that Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party were “effective,” but not necessarily in a positive way. “They were effective,” she said matter of factly. “Effective in making Black people look bad.” Later in the interview Sarah added that “we did bad too,” referring specifically to when the Black Panther Party was “fightin’ back and stuff.” Asia expressed a similar sentiment, calling the Black Panther Party “stupid” because they were “too violent.” In essence, these students did not express any understanding of why the Party felt it necessary to adopt such an approach, nor were they able to recall the ways the Party supported Black communities.

Robert and Raquel were more ambivalent about so-called violent and militant strategies compared to the other student participants. Both maintained that the Black Power era was less successful than the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, however, each seemed pleased to discover that some Blacks actually did “fight back,” as Raquel put it:

The Black Panthers, they didn't take any stuff. Like if they didn't get what they wanted then they would get what they waned the hard way. It's the easy way or the hard way. They're not gonna let no police guy just come up and like hit them for no reason. No, they're gonna fight back and they're gonna do somethin' (Interview, May 29, 2015).

Incidentally, Raquel's admiration of the Black Panthers was the main grievance she had toward the Civil Rights Movement. She could not understand why Blacks would choose not to defend themselves if they were being provoked.

Similar to students' conception of the Civil Rights Movement, The participants' memory of the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party in particular was also consistent with Mr. Abati's instruction. He addressed these two topics in a unit titled, "Empowerment and Racial Identity." Throughout this unit, Mr. Abati repeatedly used the words "violent" and "militant" to distinguish the Black Power era from the Civil Rights Movement. He further emphasized these associations through writing activities, homework assignments and quiz questions.

The topic of the Black Panthers came up in at least four separate lessons. In the introductory lesson, the objective was for students to understand the organization, goals and methods of the Black Panther Party (Fieldnotes, May 4, 2015). To meet these goals, Mr. Abati spoke about the Party's 10-Point Program and the contributions they made to the community including free lunch programs and health clinics. In the process, though, Mr. Abati kept referring to the Party as a "violent" and "militant" group. For instance at the beginning of the class, he reminded the class that the Civil Rights Movement was centered on the use of "non-violence." He then went on to assert that during the Black Power era there was a "substantial minority of people...who were like we can't just get beat all the time and so groups that use force were a lot more present during this time." Mr. Abati stressed the militant nature of the Party during a lecture he delivered a few minutes later on their Ten-Point Program.

So the Ten-Point Program was like ten basic needs, and we're gonna see that the first thing they mentioned was freedom. That was the first thing that they felt that they needed. But let's talk about two things that came as a result of the Ten-Point Program that the Black Panthers were famous for...establishing free lunch

programs [and] free health clinics in Black neighborhoods, among many other things. So the Black Panthers actually used this Ten-Point Program to create things in urban neighborhoods that they felt that African Americans needed. So, often times when we talk about the Black Panthers it gets kind of romanticized with the guns and the afros and the fists and talking about how they were fighting the power and being militant, but they actually were doing other things as well. However this legacy--the Ten-Point Program and the list of ten things that they said that they needed, the free lunch programs, the free health care--got overshadowed by the Panthers being a *militant* group. Okay, so they were a *militant* group. They *were* willing to use force if they felt it was necessary. So they were also militant. That meant that by being militant and using force they felt was necessary, they got into situations and altercations with police, with other law enforcement regularly.

For his part, Mr. Abati did highlight the Panther's contributions to African American history Vis-à-vis their Ten Point Program. On the other hand, Mr. Abati repeatedly used the term "militant"--five times in all--to describe the Party and, moreover, asserted that their legacy was ultimately "overshadowed" because their use of force caused them to clash with law enforcement. In a post-course interview, I invited Mr. Abati to comment on my finding that all of the student participants recounted the Party as being "violent" or "militant" and generally had less favorable views about the Black Panthers than they did Black people who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Mr. Abati was surprised by this, for he thought that many students in the class "were very much on the Malcolm X, militant side" (Interview, April 16, 2015). Further, he said his aim was not to paint a negative image of the Party or the Black Power movement in general but rather to show the differences in tactics. Data obtained from student interviews revealed, however, that what students internalized, did not match Mr. Abati's intent. In fact, when Mr. Abati concluded his remarks on the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program, Sarah commented under her breath that the Black Panthers were "basically savages." The respondents ultimately came to associate violent methods with failure and conversely, non-violent protest with success.

In sum, the student participants at Smith may have remembered the Black past as replete with challenges, but they also walked away learning that Blacks were resilient and worked together to challenge racism and discrimination. In this way, Smith and Kuumba student participants were once had a similar conception of the Black past. Unlike the respondents from Kuumba, though, those at Smith made distinctions between so-called nonviolent and violent methods of activism. Furthermore, they largely had unfavorable recollections of the Black Power movement in general and the Black Panther Party in particular. In the next section I present and discuss two key findings in Smith student participants' understanding of the contemporary Black experience and how this was informed by students' memory of the historical Black experience.

Smith Students' Understanding of the Contemporary Black Experience

A major contrast between Smith and Kuumba participants perception of Black experiences today is that many Smith students expressed the belief that racism was “a thing of the past.” This appeared to because the students' interpreted Mr. Abati's teacher's presentation of the Civil Rights Movement as primarily a series of struggles against racial discrimination. The notion of racism as a thing of the past appeared to be informed by students' conception of the past, which I argue mirrored Mr. Abati's presentation of African American history. In particular, the ways in which Mr. Abati's framing of racism was limited to legal cases that had been won. Students alluded to these victories as evidence that racism has largely been remedied most especially during the Civil Rights movement. Consequently, Smith students were less apt to identify instances of racism today, and instead attributed any lingering social problems to deficits in the Black community.

In what follows I present excerpts from fieldnotes and interview data to illustrate these differences in Smith students' understandings.

Victory. The vast majority of Smith student participants believed that most, if not all, of the challenges Black people faced historically have been successfully resolved. This is not to say that all of the students viewed society as being completely fair and just. On the contrary, some student participants expressed concerns over increasing incidents of police brutality--no doubt, a reflection of the times--and all of the students posited that there is still some lingering prejudice against Blacks. What distinguished Smith participants from those at Kuumba, however, was that the former tended to downplay the magnitude of these issues. Raquel, for example, felt that Black people are not always given the same opportunities as whites but said that it is not "that serious" of an issue because "it's better than what it was" (Interview, May 29, 2015). Asia meanwhile was troubled by the number of Black youths being shot recently, presumably by the police but at the same time claimed that the 14th and 15th amendments are why "to this day we still get to do what we want to do," and celebrated the fact that schools are no longer segregated (Interview, June 3, 2015). In short, the participants overall portrayed the contemporary Black experience as largely free of struggle due to the elimination of legalized racism. This was the case with Violet, who maintained that people of African ancestry have far less restrictions placed upon them than they did historically even when reality suggested otherwise. For example, Violet recognized that Smith was disproportionately comprised of Black students but attributed this to happenstance:

I feel like it's [fewer challenges today]. My school is almost 100% Black, but if I was going to a school downtown or something there would be different races going there. It wouldn't just be only me, and I would have different friends; I wouldn't just have Black friends. And now things are more fancy for people. Like

I can go downtown, and I can go to H&M, and I can go to a fancy restaurant with other people. I just like that we have more freedom now. Back then we really couldn't do that. Like water fountains were different and like now we have more fancy things.

Violet's explanation for why most of students in her school are Black was informed by her understanding of the past. Violet felt certain she would have classmates from other cultures if her home was in a more diverse community. In addition, she explained that Blacks had more freedom now than they did "back then" because she can shop downtown, go to fancy restaurants with "other people," and pointed out that the water fountains have changed. In the absence of overt racism, Violet therefore saw this as evidence that there are few issues impacting the Black community today.

Alice too maintained that Blacks face fewer challenges today because "they don't go through as much as they went through back then." Alice observed that Blacks face housing discrimination and police brutality but did not think it was necessary for Blacks to take action:

LR: If you look back, there's a theme of blacks fighting for their rights. Do you think so?

Alice: Um hm

LR: Do you think there's anything left for Blacks to fight for?

Alice: What you mean to fight for? No, they got they rights. They got school, segregated ended, they got, what else they got. They can eat in any restaurant. So there's really nothin left!

Thus, similarly to Violet, Alice believed that few challenge remain for Blacks because segregation ended and there are no longer restricted from dining in certain places.

Asia, Violet and Alice's assertions about segregation and discrimination being relics of the past mirrored the way Mr. Abati spoke about these issues in class. Take for example a lesson

he presented on the March on Washington as part of a larger unit on the Civil Rights Movement ((Fieldnotes, April 27, 2015). The objective for this lesson was for students to understand the importance of the March on Washington and consisted of a lecture followed by reviewing key points he wanted students to have in their notes. In this lesson Mr. Abati told the class that there were two main reasons why the March on Washington was a significant event. The first is that it is was when Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream Speech,” which Mr. Abati said was a “hopeful and inspirational message about where African Americans had come from.” According to Mr. Abati, the second reason the march was important was because it was a huge gathering that “nobody in the country could ignore, especially [President Kennedy]. From here, Mr. Abati told students that “what’s *really* important about the March on Washington is what happened the following year”:

The Civil Rights Act of 1964. This became an important *outcome* of the March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. What it basically did was that it banned segregation and discrimination in pretty much all public places and American life. It officially banned segregation and discrimination in schools, in job employment, in public facilities...Like it was the thing that basically got rid of Jim Crow. Or at least it was supposed to (he says in a lowered voice). Story for another day. Alright? And therefore we are done.

In this excerpt, Mr. Abati explicitly tells students that what is most important to remember about the March on Washington was that it resulted in segregation and discrimination being banned in virtually all areas of public life in the United States including schools, employment and public facilities. At the end, Mr. Abati suggested that this may not have been what happened in reality-- he says this was “supposed” to happen--but did not expound on this statement. Instead, Mr. Abati said they would address this topic on another day and missed out an opportunity to discuss the ways that racism may still be prevalent day. After concluding his lecture, Mr. Abati proceeded to

ask students questions to make sure they knew “what we should have in our notes and what we should talk about” with regards to the March on Washington:

Mr. Abati: If we were talking about like the important outcomes of this event, so it’s 250,000 people there, what happened during this event? What happened as a result of this event? What could we say? What big moment took place?

Student: Banned segregation

Mr. Abati: Banned segregation. I’ll come back to you. What happened *during* this time period? Like what happened *during* the March on Washington that became well-known for like generations?

Student: The speech at the march?

Mr. Abati: Right, the speech. “I Have a Dream Speech.” And more importantly, what happened *after* the March on Washington? Like if you had to talk about the way that it improved the lives of African Americans, or at least was supposed to, what thing happened that was supposed to be big for African Americans?

Student: Ended segregation

Mr. Abati: Okay, due to what? What banned segregation?

Student: Civil rights

Mr. Abati: Right, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In this exchange, students repeat what Mr. Abati told them was important to recall about the March on Washington, including that it ended segregation. Indeed, the latter point was what Mr. Abati wanted his students to remember from his lecture if they “had to talk about the way that it improved the lives of African Americans.” Mr. Abati repeated his earlier comment about how segregation was *supposed* to have ended after this historical event but once again chose not to pursue this thought. In the end, the respondents cited the end of overtly racist practices as evidence that there are few hurdles remaining for Blacks today.

Next, I present the second dominant theme in Smith student participants' understanding of the contemporary Black experience followed by a summary and conclusion of this chapter.

Cultural deficit. As I discussed above, all of the Smith student participants suggested there were few remaining challenges impacting the Black community in contemporary society. As evidence, they pointed to the absence of segregated facilities and public spaces (e.g. schools, buses and water fountains) and rights that have been granted through constitutional amendments. In other words, the students believed Blacks' lived experiences have dramatically improved due to the lack of overt racism typically associated with the past. Some respondents did express concerns, however, over increasing incidents of police brutality--no doubt, a reflection of the times--and many posited that there is still some lingering prejudice against Blacks in the form of employment discrimination and stereotypes. What distinguished Smith participants' evaluation of on-going struggles from those at Kuumba was that the former tended to downplay the magnitude of these issues. In addition to this, the Smith respondents largely blamed Blacks for the challenges they experience today as opposed to Kuumba participants who attributed on-going struggles to institutionalized racism. This latter point of contrast constitutes the second prominent theme that emerged in Smith students' understanding of the contemporary Black experience.

Brittany was particularly adamant that the issues plaguing Black people today are because of their own doing. She described having a positive experience in the class and enjoyed the fact that Mr. Abati did not "tip toe" around sensitive topics like she was used to her teachers doing in "regular history" classes (Interview, June 1, 2015). Brittany felt that what she learned in the African American class was important because "you should always know the history of

where you came from” and that it gave her a different perspective of the world. When Brittany elaborated on her response, she talked specifically about how Black people are the reason they are looked down upon in society:

What every Black person does, it affects the other one. They’re looking at us bad already because of the riots and stuff like that from back in the day but y’all doing it now. They’re still looking at us crazy. Y’all still unsuccessful. Y’all animals because of the way y’all actin’.

Brittany reiterated her criticism of the Black community when I asked her if she thought Blacks today face fewer, more or fewer challenges than they did in the past:

Brittany: I think [Blacks] face more, but I think that’s just their fault because they’re letting the white people...y’all making them [Blacks are doing] worse. Like y’all makin’ them think like oh [Black people are] worse than what they were back then so it’s like y’all havin’ more problems. If I was white I wouldn’t respect any Black person because of what these Black kids out here doing. Like y’all supposed to be in school, but y’all killin’ people.

LR: What do think are some of the problems?

Brittany: Not a lot of affection. Like not enough love from their parents, maybe neglect because if you can allow your child to hang out all times of the night you just don’t care.

LR: What problems do think African Americans face today that they didn’t in the past since you said they deal with more?

Brittany: I’m not saying [Blacks] face more problems, but its like what happened to them in the past it’s like it’s worse now

LR: What are some of those things?

Brittany: Like maybe a white person would probably give you a little respect back then, maybe a little more than a white person would give you now. I just think a white person would just look at you and just shake their head just because of how the young Black people, their decisions affect everybody, so [whites are] looking down on us because of the way [young Black people are] acting.

LR: When you said earlier that when Black kill it affects everybody, who do you mean by ‘everybody’?

Brittany: Like all the Black people. ‘Cause a white person look at it as if a Black person kills another Black person I guess it’s still right for *me* to kill a Black person. Then it’s like not only do you have whites killing [Blacks] but you have Blacks [doing the same thing]. So you have the white people looking at [Blacks] like, y’all can kill Black people, okay we’ll kill Black people too, so it’s like a type of permission. Like y’all giving us permission, y’all are making it look like [whites are] supposed to be doing this.

The above reveals how Brittany’s memory of the past informed her understanding of present day; specifically, that Black people are primarily responsible for whites’ negative views of them.

Brittany believed the challenges Blacks experience are more severe than they were historically because Black people are killing each other. For this reason, Brittany believed that whites likely had more respect for Blacks “back then.” Moreover, Brittany argued that by killing each other, Black people are essentially giving whites “permission” to do the same thing. This suggests that in Brittany’s conception of the past, Blacks did not engage in violent or criminal behavior, which in turn led her to view the present day Black community from a deficit lens.

Another student who blamed Black people for on-going challenges was Alice. For the most part, Alice felt Blacks are much better off today than they used to be mostly because overt racism has become a thing of the past. One issue Alice did identify was police brutality; however, she felt it was Blacks’ fault that they are being killed by the police. “‘Cause Black people [are] violent. Like the cop don’t know if they gonna attack or shoot, so they move first before they get attacked or shot” (Interview, June 9, 2015). Intrigued by her response, I asked Alice what she thought about a recent incident that took place in McKinney, Texas that fueled conversations about how the Black community--in this case, Black youth--are routinely profiled and mistreated by the police. The incident occurred on June 5, 2015 when former Cpl. Eric Casebolt responded to a disturbance at a private pool where several teenagers were having a

party. In video footage that gained national attention a number of young males, all Black, can be seen sitting on the ground--many in handcuffs--despite it being a diverse crowd. What sparked the most outcry, however, was what happened to then 15-year-old Dajerria Becton. After yelling at a group of teenagers to go home, Casebolt turned his attention to Becton for apparently talking back to him as she was leaving. He proceeded to grab the girl and forced her onto the ground by putting her arm behind her back and grasping the back of her head, causing many of the teenagers standing by to erupt in shock. When two Black males attempted to help the girl, Casebolt pulled out his gun and pointed it at them, causing them to run off. Casebolt stayed behind while two other officers pursue the two males. Becton lay face down on the ground crying for the next four minutes while Casebolt knelt on her back with his knees. Soon, the two officers returned with one of the young males--one holding each of his arms--who is stumbling and has blood dripping from his mouth (“Cops Crash Pool Party”). Below was Alice’s reaction to the events that unfolded just four days prior.

LR: Now, do you think it was the girl’s fault or do you think the cop had a reason to act the way he did?

Alice: He had a reason! She was probably bein’ ratchet, all hype, like we ain’t shuttin’ nothin’ down. So he did what he did for a reason! She was probably in his face gettin’ hype. Like why didn’t you just say ok, we’re gonna stop the party? She was being ratchet so he had to do what he had to do.

LR: What about the officer waving his gun?

Alice: You said the two boys ran over there right? He didn’t know what they was gonna do, so he had to keep himself armed at all times, ‘cause he didn’t know what they motives were.

Similar to Brittany, Alice also held Blacks culpable for the way they are (mis)treated by the police. She presumed that the girl was not complying with Casebolt’s request to end the part and

believed, therefore, that Casebolt's actions were justified. As to Casebolt pointing his gun at the two boys, Alice continued to defend the officer by suggesting he was acting in self-defense.

Robert was yet another student who blamed Black people for how they are treated by law enforcement. Like Brittany, Robert claimed that Blacks face greater challenges today but he attributed this to Blacks over-exaggerating the role of race:

LR: So in what way today do you think Blacks face more challenges today?

Robert: Well, I hate to say this but we startin' to make everything seem like it's about race. Everything that's happenin', we makin it seem like it's just because we Black. I hate to say it but it's like we startin' to use it as an excuse now.

LR: Ok. Can you think of an example of a way that Blacks use race as an excuse?

Robert: Uh, a simple one, um, is when Black people get pulled over. Really that's just, you know, us bein'--just bein' ghetto. Most--like, Black people gettin' bein' pulled over, it's not about the race thing. That's just, if you doin' somethin' bad, somethin' s gonna happen. So, yeah.

LR: Any other ways you think Blacks use race as an excuse?

Robert: Um [inhales] right now, not that much. But, um, if a Black person dies in white people's custody, half of the time, that--it's because of racism. But other times it's, like, it's a accident or a coincidence. It's a accident. A, uh, unfortunate consequence, I guess.

LR: What do you think is the cause of Blacks being killed by the police?

Robert: Uh, I guess us just, like, resisting arrest, you know. Or the cops, you know, bein', like, unnecessarily rough.

LR: Do you think there's a solution to that problem?

Robert: Um, yeah. You know, Black people just don't do what they do--get mad, get smart with the cops. Just do what you gotta do, get it out of the way with. And for cops they just need [to be] peaceful. Both Black and white [people], they can just be peaceful, do what they gotta do and get it out of the way and over with.

According to Robert, Black people face greater challenges today than they did historically because Blacks are beginning to give race too much significance. As an example, Robert claimed that when Blacks are pulled over by the police, it is not because they are being racially profiled but because they are doing something wrong. He also downplayed the role of race in cases where Blacks are killed by police officers by asserting that half time it is an “accident” or a “coincidence.” He went on to posit that Blacks are being killed by the police because they are “resisting arrest” and subsequently maintained that one way to prevent this from happening is for Black people to not put up a fight when they are being arrested. Robert’s response was illustrative of how the majority of Smith student participants responded when I asked them to compare the hardships Blacks face today compared to the past. That is, of the challenges they did identify, many in the group placed the blame on the Black community.

While many participants attributed prejudice and police brutality to deficits within the Black community, two students provided an alternate explanation. For Raquel and Asia, the real problem is that whites still believe they are superior to Blacks. Raquel’s assessment of why Blacks are not afforded equal employment opportunities captures this sentiment:

I think that some white people still think that we are less than them. Most of the time most big people are white or close to it or mixed with it or something. So they will prefer who they are, somebody like them [rather] than a different person.

Here, Raquel attributes employment discrimination to prevailing notions of white supremacy, which ran counter to the way the majority of other respondents saw as the root of prevailing issues. Raquel’s response reveals her understanding of the historical Black experience and how this informed her perceptions of present day. Raquel alternative viewpoint show the range of

meanings students can make and at the same time how certain memories of the past can be a powerful force for making sense of the present.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that Mr. Abati helped shape Smith student participants' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience through his representation of Black history. The eight Smith participants did not reference as many curricular materials as the Kuumba participants; however, they drew heavily from teacher and classroom discourse to help remember, or reconstruct, the Black past. Students in turn used what they learned about the nature of the historical Black experience in making conclusions about the present day Black experience. In all, there were four dominant themes emerged from the data, which I divided evenly between two sections. Taken together, students' understanding of the Black past mirrored their teacher's historical narrative (e.g., triumph).

Two dominant themes emerged in Smith student participants' understanding of the historical Black experience based on what they learned in Mr. Abati's African American history class. I classified the first as *struggle* to capture the way respondents recounted people of African ancestry as being an oppressed group. I intentionally decided to leave off "enduring" as I used with Kuumba participants because their portrayal of past struggles was compartmentalized and fragmented. In stark contrast to Kuumba participants, Smith students as a group confined past struggles to two primary time periods--slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Another point of contrast was that the Smith respondents only recounted overt racism (e.g., segregation) while those at Kuumba described racism as becoming more hidden over time.

The second theme I presented with regards to Smith students' understanding of Black history was *strength and achievements*. Thus while Smith student participants may have remembered the Black past as having its fair share of challenges, they also walked away learning that Blacks were resilient and worked together to challenge racism and discrimination. In this way, Smith and Kuumba student participants had a similar conception of the Black past. Unlike the respondents from Kuumba, though, those at Smith made distinctions between so-called nonviolent and violent methods of activism. Furthermore, they largely had unfavorable recollections of the Black Power in general and the Black Panther Party in particular. In addition, students' understandings of different forms of resistance resembled the way Mr. Abati talked about, or depicted, these movements.

In the second section, I proceeded to delineate two major themes in Smith students' understanding of the contemporary Black experience. I referred to the first as *victory* because the vast majority of Smith student participants believed that most, if not all, of the challenges Black people faced historically have been successfully resolved. This is not to say that all of the students viewed society as being completely fair and just. On the contrary, some student participants expressed concerns over increasing incidents of police brutality--no doubt, a reflection of the times--and all of the students posited that there is still some lingering prejudice against Blacks. What distinguished Smith participants from those at Kuumba, however, was that the former tended to downplay the magnitude of these issues because they felt it is much better to be Black today than it was in the past.

The fourth and final theme I presented in this chapter was *cultural deficit*. Some respondents did express concerns about incidents of police brutality and lingering prejudice

against Blacks in the form of employment discrimination and stereotypes. At the same time, though, they tended to downplay the magnitude of these issues. In addition to this, the Smith respondents largely blamed Blacks for the challenges they experience today as opposed to Kuumba participants who attributed on-going struggles to institutionalized racism.

In the next chapter, I conclude by summing up the aims of this study, methodology, key findings and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

While the benefits of Black students learning about their history have been well-established within the scholarly literature on the teaching of African American history, few studies have examined how Black students make sense of this knowledge in practice. Moreover, numerous scholars maintain that teachers' representations of African American history have import for students' historical and contemporary understandings; however, there is little empirical research to support or refute these claims. Framed by the theory of collective memory, the purpose of this study was to investigate how differences in the way teachers talk about, or represent, the nature of African American history shape how students remember, or conceptualize, the Black past and interpret the extent to which the contemporary Black experience has changed or remained the same. To explore this, I conducted an ethnographic study involving two school sites that required students to complete a year-long African American history course. The participants in this study were two groups of Black high school students and their respective African American history teacher. Analysis of data derived from classroom observations, student and teacher interviews and curricular artifacts (e.g., reading materials, handouts, assessments and writing samples) indicate that the student groups conveyed contrasting understandings and that these differences corresponded to their teachers' representation of African American history. This is consistent with studies finding that the way teachers talk about, or frame, the Black past shape students' understandings in distinct ways (Bettis, Cooks and Bergin, 1994; Bolgatz, 2006; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Raupach, 2008).

This study builds on previous research by investigating students' understandings in relation to competing narratives of African American history. The extant literature shows that although teachers tend to emphasize similar themes when talking about Blacks' historical experiences--e.g. oppression and agency--educators do not approach these topics in the same manner (Epstein, 2009; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; King, 2014, 2016; Wills, 1996, 2005). For instance, some teachers have been found to compartmentalize Blacks' historical struggles into distinctive time periods while others tell students that society is still unjust. Variations also exist in the examples teachers present about the ways Blacks resisted their oppression and who was involved in these efforts. The selective 'remembering' and 'forgetting' of memories from the past subsequently leads to different narratives of the African American historical experience. The significance of these narratives is that they purport to explain what happened and continues to happen to Black people in America (Thomas, 2012). This study is original in that it examines what competing narratives of African American history provide Black students for understanding the meaning and significance of African American history and its connection to the present and themselves.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, I presented three prominent themes that emerged in Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history--*oppression, resistance* and *the struggle continues--a call to action*. Taken together, Sis. Shabazz framed African American history as a *continuity narrative*, or an on-going struggle. In doing so, Sis. Shabazz deliberately brought the experiences of Black women to the forefront as a way to counter the traditionally male-dominated narrative of U.S. history as well explicated numerous examples of the injustices that

continue to plague the Black community. In this way, Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history reflected Stage 5 of the *Stages of Multicultural Curriculum Transformation* (Banks, 1993; McIntosh, 2000) in that she explicitly addressed prevailing social issues while encouraging students to engage in social activism and presented diverse historical voices and perspectives.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how Kuumba student participants' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience were shaped by Sis. Shabazz's depiction of African American history. First, the nine student participants relied heavily on curricular materials as well as teacher and classroom discourse when recalling what they learned in the African American and American history courses. In doing so, the participants as a group also portrayed African American history as a continuity narrative. In turn, the student participants drew from their collective memory of the Black past to support their conclusions about the present-day Black experience. In all, there were four themes that emerged in students' understandings--*oppression, resistance and achievements, the struggle continues* and *solutions unclear*. The first three themes paralleled Sis. Shabazz's portrayal of African American history while the fourth appears to reflect a shortcoming of Sis. Shabazz's historical narrative. The fourth theme revealed that although the student participants largely believed the fight for social justice must continue, they did not have a clear sense of how to address these challenges. I suggested that this reflects a limitation in Sis. Shabazz's in that while she promoted social activism, Sis. Shabazz fell short in discussing how students might have to adapt the strategies their ancestors used to fit the current socio-political context.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I subsequently presented Mr. Abati's representation of African American history and Smith students' key understandings, respectively. First, in contrast to Sis. Shabazz, Mr. Abati presented African American history as a story of *triumph*, or celebratory tales of what people of African ancestry have achieved in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Mr. Abati's triumphant narrative comprised of three major themes--*oppression*, *empowerment* and *victory*. I discussed how virtually each of Mr. Abati's lessons began with some form of hardship followed by an explanation of what Blacks did individually or collectively to overcome these obstacles and what was achieved through Blacks' efforts. Ultimately, my findings aligned with what Mr. Abati enjoyed most about teaching the African American history class; specifically, having his students "become more confident in realizing African Americans are an integral part of America" and realize "that Black people have accomplished a lot" (Interview, March 20, 2015). Whereas Sis. Shabazz's representation of African American history reflected Stage 5 of the *Stages of Multicultural Curriculum Transformation*, Mr. Abati's approach was more of *integration* (Stage 3). A strength of Mr. Abati's teaching is that he used various resources to teach about the historical Black experience. On the other hand, most of the content was delivered from a male-centric perspective. And although Mr. Abati wanted his students to feel empowered to address issues plaguing Black communities in contemporary society, he did not make these challenges explicit.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I talked about the ways in which Smith students participants' understanding of the historical and contemporary Black experience appeared to be shaped by their teacher. The student group at Smith, too, relied heavily on curricular materials and teacher and classroom discourse when recalling what they learned about African American history and

drew from their collective memory of the past when making conclusions about the present-day Black experience. Similar to Mr. Abati, the student group collectively remembered the Black past as story of triumph. Thus whereas Kuumba student participants largely believed that the struggle against racism and discrimination is not over, the majority of Smith students expressed that Blacks have successfully overcome most racial barriers. I presented four themes that emerged in Smith students' understandings--*oppression, resistance and achievements, victory and cultural deficit*. The first three themes paralleled Mr. Abati's portrayal of African American history while the fourth can be considered an unintended consequence of Mr. Abati's historical narrative. This fourth theme referred to the students' tendency to hold Blacks responsible for their own suffering. In other words, since many students believed most forms of racism and discrimination have been eradicated, they attributed any existing challenges to deficits within the Black community.

Implications and Significance of Findings

First, student voice matters. As Landa (2012) asserts, teachers cannot be sure what students are thinking or feeling as they listen to stories about African American history unless teachers create spaces for students to share their understandings. Even if students express that they enjoy learning about African American history curricula, this alone does not reveal how students are processing the information that has been presented to them. In light of this, I made a concerted effort when writing this dissertation to make a distinction between what the teachers taught or presented and what the student participants learned in practice. In this study, for example, Mr. Abati's goal in teaching students about the Black Panther Party was to show different methods African Americans used to fight injustice. During interviews, however, I found

that what student participants *learned*, or processed, generally did not align with Mr. Abati's objectives. For instance Sara concluded that the Panthers were "savages" and many others similarly came to associate the Black Panther Party with violence and ineffectiveness. When I shared this finding with Mr. Abati, he seemed to regret not asking students what they gleaned from what he taught them: "I could very well be wrong [about what students took away] because you have to ask them about that! That is so interesting" (Interview, April 16, 2015). Meanwhile at Kuumba, Sis. Shabazz hoped to inspire her students to engage in social activism by showing numerous examples of how Blacks resisted their oppression as well as emphasizing that movements required time and strategy. Despite this, most Kuumba student participants were at a loss for how to effect change in the current historical moment. I am left wondering how students would have responded if they had (more) opportunities to share their views about the limits and possibilities of present-day activism, especially in the context of the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement. How effective do students think these demonstrations are? Why or why not? Can students see themselves doing anything to combat the challenges they discussed extensively about in class? If so, what? If not, why?

In addition to uncovering meanings students make when listening to narratives about the historical Black experience, privileging student voice can reveal the range of perspectives students possess. In this study, I deliberately included responses that departed from the group, as we cannot assume all Black children will react to or interpret African American history the exact same way merely because they share the same racial-cultural identity. In fact, this in itself is a presumption. Racial identity scholars have shown that individuals not only experience ethnic identity development differently and but that this occurs in stages (Cross, 1991; Sellers et al.,

1998; Tatum, 1992; Phinney, 1992). Put simply, a child may *look* Black or African American, but they may not identify themselves as such. In this study all of the student participants self-identified as “Black/African American,” but I would not want to presume they would all glean the same meanings and indeed they did not. As an example, while the majority of Kuumba student participants believed that Black people today face more or the same degree of challenges as they did in the past--albeit in different ways--one student, Jordan, contended that Blacks’ status in America has dramatically improved and, moreover, that any hardships they do face have been brought on by themselves. Ultimately, I argue that giving students a platform to share their understandings and range of viewpoints can lead to more engaging and meaningful African American history curricula.

Second, how teachers frame the meaning and significance of African American history has import for how students define the political imperatives of the present and future (Bruyneel, 2014). In this study, the two student groups conveyed competing conceptions of African American history that mirrored the historical narratives presented by their respective teachers. At Kuumba, the student participants collectively portrayed African American history as a continuity narrative, or enduring struggle, whereas the students at Smith interpreted the Black past as a story of triumph. The significance of this finding cannot be overstated. Although many Kuumba students felt at a loss for how to address prevailing injustices--namely mass incarceration and police brutality--they were nonetheless aware that there is a struggle to be had. Thus, they may not know what steps to take *now*, but they may in the future. This is not to suggest that all of the students, or even some, will become “foot soldiers” (Merelman, 1993, p. 355) in the fight for social justice; certainly, however, there are many ways of effecting change beyond creating or

joining a movement. As Sis. Shabazz maintained, the act of thinking in itself is a form of revolutionary action.

Smith participants, by contrast, largely framed racism and discrimination as remnants of the past. Consequently, students such as Alice were unable to problematize contemporary issues facing the Black community. An example is when she and I discussed the incident that took place in McKinney, Texas where a white police officer threatened to shoot two young Black males who were attempting to help a young Black girl who the officer had just thrown on to the ground. When I asked Alice to share her assessment of what took place, she reasoned that the officer was simply trying to defend himself and suggested that this would not have happened if the teenagers left sooner. What was troubling about Alice's rationale was not so much that she defended the officer but that it reflected a larger pattern of Smith students' tendency to downplay the prevalence of racism and consequently hold Blacks responsible for their own suffering.

In sum, how teachers represent the historical Black experience has import for how students make sense of the present state of affairs and what it means for the future and themselves. I do not mean to imply that teachers alone inform students' understandings, for young people receive information from a wide range of sources including television, film, their families, peers, and communities. Still, as Wills asserts, teachers can and do have a great deal of authority "over the 'official' meaning-making activities that occur in classrooms" (2005, p. 114). In addition to being "curricular-instructional gatekeepers" (Thornton, 2005) who make key decisions about what content is presented to students, this study showed that teachers also help shape its meaning and significance from their facilitation of class discussions to the questions they posed. In both classrooms, the teachers dictated what ought to be remembered and the

correct way to interpret the nature of the Black past. Some may argue that Mr. Abati was simply following the curriculum and consequently had less control over what he taught than Sis. Shabazz did. I would agree that Mr. Abati had to work within certain parameters; on the other hand, he did not express any conflicts of interest with the goals of the course. Moreover, Mr. Abati said he did not feel the curriculum constrained his teaching because he had the freedom to modify the content as he saw fit. Given the numerous ways African American history has been, and continues to be, conceptualized, educators would do well to reflect on how they are framing the historical Black narrative and how this could be being received by students.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

In this section I wish discuss three key limitations of this study and how each may be addressed by future research. First, I studied students' understandings in relation to their teachers' representations of African American history. Thus, I did not give very much consideration to how the participants' family and upbringing may have influenced my findings. I attempted to account for this by asking students to describe how frequently African American history was talked about in their home. However, there are other ways in which family members can influence student learning. For instance in a study involving Black college students, Thornhill (2014) found that students interpreted, engaged with and responded to African American history in different ways depending on if they were socialized into "critical" or "colorblind" interpretations of race and racism. Thus, future research could expand on the present study by examining the relationship between student understandings, the nature of students racial socialization and teachers' representations of African American history.

Second, both of the teachers in this study were of African ancestry as were the student participants. Thus it is possible that the study's findings could have been partly influenced by each classroom's homogenous racial composition. For instance, might the two teachers have presented different historical narratives if their classrooms were racially and culturally diverse? Similarly, would the student participants have constructed alternate meanings if their teacher were not Black? It would therefore be worthwhile to carry out a similar study in diverse settings in an effort to create more meaningful African American history curricula in a variety of contexts.

Finally, the research sites in this study each had a distinct school culture. Whereas Kuumba is an African-centered institution, Smith employed a more traditional approach to teaching and learning. This calls into question how much of an influence each school's culture had on shaping students' understandings. At the same time, findings from this study suggest that context mattered inasmuch as the teachers' representations of African American history aligned with the mission and vision of the school. As an institution, for example, Kuumba placed a strong emphasis on notions of freedom and social justice. Consistent with this vision, Sis. Shabazz strived to teach African American history in a way that promoted social activism. In this regard, each teacher's sense of purpose for teaching African American appeared to inform the nature of their historical narratives, which in turn shaped students' understandings in distinctive ways. I would argue, then, that had Sis. Shabazz presented a different narrative, Kuumba students' interpretations would have reflected this change also. I do recognize, however, that I cannot completely rule out the role of school context. Consequently, investigating this

relationship could provide further insight into the myriad of factors that help shape students' understandings.

Recommendations for Educators

Structure classrooms as “critical mnemonic workspaces”. Wills (2005) asserts that classrooms should be reconceptualized as spaces to remember multiple, competing pasts by complicating “privileged traditions of remembering.” According to Wills, this entails developing curriculum and pedagogical practices “that build and enrich students’ historical repertoires with multiple and contradictory cultural tools.” For example, when teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement, teachers could ask students if they think all Black people indeed participated in the Movement. Based on findings from this study, I suspect many students would say they do. This can subsequently open the door to explain that not all Black people engaged in activism by contextualizing it in present day. If we were to ask students, for example, to consider if all Black people have been actively involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, they would presumably answer in the negative. In this instance, the teacher could help students generate thoughts as to why some people have not participated, including themselves. I believe that such exercises could help add nuance to students’ understanding of the past, and in this case, social movements, which may in turn lead students to think more critically about the present.

Prioritize student voice. It is critical for teachers to create spaces for students to share how they are processing the information being presented to them. Otherwise, as I have previously indicated, there is no way for teachers to know what meanings students are making or how they are being impacted. I caution teachers, however, not to use this as a means of

controlling students' thoughts but rather to address misunderstandings, or factually erroneous information.

One way educators can privilege student voice is by making classroom discussions a regular part of their instruction. Indeed, several student participants from both schools cited this as one of the top five strategies they would recommend to teachers of African American history. Nate from Kuumba, for example, noted the following with regards to why he enjoys class discussions (Interview May 29, 2015):

When I was in school, even home-schooled, you'd be given this information and expected to just take it in. And if you don't [express] any of your opinions, maybe you can't exactly fully digest it due to that fact. Some people may need to actually say something or talk about it with somebody to fully understand it.

Similarly, Robert from Smith commented that teachers should hold class discussions so students can "say what we think about this or how we feel about what's going on or what happened" (Interview, May 15, 2015). Nate and Robert's responses are reflective of how students from both sites spoke about discussions in that they welcomed the opportunity to talk about what interested them. A specific discussion-based strategy teachers might consider using is Socratic Seminars, which many student participants enjoyed because it is student-driven.

Go beyond the textbook. I encourage teachers to use the textbook as but one source of information. Both teachers in this study incorporated a range of materials including documentaries, movies and other types of visual media, images, and music and students. I noticed through my own observations that the use of these materials made students more interested in the lesson at hand and virtually all of the student participants themselves relayed to me that this enhanced their experience in their respective African American history courses. In my work with pre-service educators, I often remind them that if they would not find a particular

lesson or method of instruction interesting, their students likely will not either. It may be particularly compelling to rely on a textbook for those who are not very knowledgeable about African American history. In such cases, I implore educators to seek outside sources and commit to educating oneself in the same way a teacher would if she/he lacked the appropriate content or experiential knowledge to effectively teach math or science. I would argue, however, that the stakes are higher for teaching history, as it is not just about providing information. The teaching of history does not just impact how students think about the past but informs how they see the world and themselves. Thus, the responsibility of teaching African American history or any other history should not be taken lightly. It requires one to commit to always be in a state of learning and presenting a range of materials, not just to make students more engaged but to provide various perspectives as well.

Bring in speakers. During one of my observations at Smith, Mr. Abati had shown students a clip of a 1995 interview between Larry King and Rosa Parks. Many of the students were intrigued by seeing this historical icon in a contemporary context. There she was, in live color, recounting what happened that fateful day when she refused to move from her seat. I chuckled to myself when one of the students inquired whether Ms. Parks was still alive, until I realized I had no idea when Ms. Parks passed away. My heart subsequently dropped when I learned that Ms. Parks was with us until 2005. I naively thought to myself that had I started my teaching career just a few years prior, I could have had my students learn about her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott from Ms. Parks herself! I then wondered how many schools she had been invited to during her lifetime and how many children had the great fortune of meeting her in person. How might the students in Mr. Abati's class have been impacted if they were presented

with an example of living history? There are undoubtedly countless individuals in the Black community that could bring history alive and they need not be famous individuals. For instance, I remember my own grandmother sharing with me that she and her family were sharecroppers, which was something I had previously only read about in textbooks. Hearing from my grandmother that she had personal experience as a sharecropper--that this is a part of *my* family *history*--made me feel that much more connected to this past and ceased being an abstract concept. My recommendation for educators, then, is to note places in the curriculum where it would be fitting to bring in community members and other speakers to bring the curriculum to life and arguably, more meaningful.

Make connections. Teachers should not teach African American history in a vacuum but should constantly make connections to students and present day society. Without this, it can be difficult--if not impossible--for students to see the importance or relevance of learning about the past. In addition to insights I have gained from this study, my experience teaching middle school, high school and college students has taught me that my most disengaged students are those that do not find what they are learning to be useful in any kind of way. Thus, before teaching a lesson, unit or course, I have started asking myself what is the larger significance of what I am teaching for my students beyond needing to do well on a test or assignment. In other words, why and how does what I am teaching matter in the larger scheme of things *for them*? As I write this, I am reminded of how students in Sis. Shabazz's class were shocked to learn that schools are still segregated. It made me realize how easy it is to assume that students are able to make connections between the past and present on their own. One way teachers can facilitate this process is to ask students at least once during a given lesson if what they are learning reminds

them of anything that is happening presently and for teachers to have their own examples to share.

Closing Remarks

The idea for this study emerged out of a genuine concern for how Black students experience learning about African American history in school. Not long after beginning my doctoral program, I accepted a position to teach a summer reading course to local high school students, the vast majority of whom identified as Black or African American. One day while discussing our class text, *Revolutionary Suicide* (Newton, 1973), some of my students commented that they wished they had learned more about this “stuff” in school. They were specifically referring to the Black Panther Party and their efforts to fortify Black communities. I was immediately taken aback by my students’ responses, as I was under the impression that the school district required all high school students to take a course on African American history. It turned out that my students did complete such a course but felt that their teachers misrepresented the Black Panther Party as simply an organization that carried guns to intimidate people. Post-class, I realized that my reaction was grounded in the assumption that learning about African American history is an inherently positive and enlightening experience for Black students.

What I had not considered up to that point was how African American was being talked about, or messaged in school. Bruyneel (2014) asserts that “the past does not speak for itself, but rather actors, institutions and discourses speak for and shape the meaning of the past through the construction of histories and memories” (p.76). From this perspective, teaching African American can and should not be viewed as the mere imparting of ‘facts.’ Indeed, findings from this study showed that actors--in this case teachers--can shape the meaning of the historical

Black experience in any number of ways that each has import for how students make sense of the present and by extension themselves.

In many ways, completing this study has left me more unsettled than when I began, as it raises further questions about the status of teaching African American history in school. For instance, what qualifies someone to teach African American history? Is it better to expose students--in particular Black children--to African American history no matter how well executed it is, than not at all? If so, what are the potential consequences for student understandings? Last, but certainly not least, should schools assume control over teaching students about their cultural heritage or should communities take more ownership for this task? If the latter, what form would this take?

At the same time, I believe more than ever that it is vital for Black children--indeed *all* children--to be knowledgeable of, and feel connected to, their history. The question is, how are students processing this knowledge and in what ways can or should this inform the ways in which this history is approached in school?

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APPENDIX A STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Background questions

1. To start, can you tell me how you came to attend this school?

Probe:

a. Kuumba participants: Is it your first time attending an African-centered school? How do you feel about attending an African-centered school

2. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how interested were you wanting to learn about African American history before this year? Can you explain your rating?

Probe:

a. Would you say your interest in wanting to learn about African American history has increased, decreased, or stayed the same since taking this class? Please explain.

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how much would you say you knew about African American history before this year?

Probe:

a. Can you explain your rating and give examples of what you knew?

b. How and where did you learn this information?

c. Is African American history something that you grew up talking about with your family and/or is regularly talked about at your home or among other family members now?

Can you tell me more about that?

4. How important do you think it is for students to learn about African American history in school?

5. How do you feel about being required to learn about African American history (AAH) in school?

Probe:

a. Do you think that AAH should be optional? If so, for whom and why? If not, why not?

b. How, if at all, do you think Black students would benefit by learning about their history and culture? (e.g. how think or hope they would be impacted?)

c. How, if at all, do you think non-Black students would benefit by learning about AAH history? (e.g. how think they or hope would be impacted?)

II. Students' attitudes about the course

A. Structure

1. What, if anything, did you enjoy about learning African American history (AAH)? Not enjoy? Why?
2. What do you think your teacher's goals were?
Probe:
 - a. What do you think of these goals?
 - b. Do you think there should be different goals?
3. What did you think of the assignments you had to do for these classes?
Probe:
 - a. How meaningful would you consider the assignments you had to do in your class?
4. How do you feel about the way you were assessed in these classes?
5. Can you share at least one memory from the class that stands out to you from this year? Something that was memorable from either class for whatever reason? Why did this stand out?
6. How do you feel about the way your teacher taught about African American history?
 - a. Is there anything you think your teacher did well?
 - b. Is there anything you wish your teacher did more of? Less of? Why?
 - c. Can you think of a time your teacher discussed a topic or presented material that you wish he had done differently? If so, what and why?
7. Is there anything else you wish were different about the class?

B. Content

1. Were there any topic(s) that you enjoyed learning about in this class more than others? If so, what and why?
2. Were there any topic(s) that you did *not* enjoy learning about? If so, what and why?
3. Is there any topic(s) or aspects of African American history (AAH) not talked about in the class that you wish were or think should be? If so, what and why?
4. Do you think what you learned in these classes/this class was important for you to know in any way? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. What did you think of the videos your teacher showed in class?
Probe:

- a. Does one stand out in particular for you? If so, Why?
- b. What emotions/thoughts do you recall having as you watched these videos? Please give examples and explain.
- c. Do you think your experience in the class would have been the same if your teacher did not show you any video clips? Why or why not?

6. Throughout the year you learned about many historical Black figures. What five would you say stand out to you the most and why?

Probe:

- a. What word or words would you use to describe these figures as a whole?
- b. Did you enjoy learning more about women than men or visa versa? Please explain
- c. Do you wish you learned about more women and/or men? Please explain.

III. Student Understandings

A. Understanding of the historical Black experience

1. To start, can you tell me your understanding of what happened during the following historical periods based off of what you learned in this class? In other words, what do you remember learning about each period?
 - a. Pre-enslavement / Before slavery
 - b. Enslavement/slavery
 - c. Reconstruction
 - d. Jim Crow
 - e. Civil Rights movement
 - f. Black power era
 - i. How would you describe the Black Panther Party?
2. Thinking about all the things you just described, how did it make you feel to learn about all that African Americans experienced in the past?

B. Relationship to present day Black experience

1. Do you think African Americans as a whole face fewer challenges today than they did in the past, more, or the same amount of challenges?

Probe:

- a. Please explain and give examples
- b. Do you think the Black community faces any challenges today? If so, what?
- c. What do you think is the cause or causes of these challenges?
- b. What do you think is the solution to the problem(s) you identified, if anything?
- c. Do you see yourself doing anything to address the challenge(s) you talked about? If so, what? If not, why not?

2. Do you think there's anything left for African Americans to fight for? If so, what? If not, why not?

3. Some students don't enjoy learning about African American history because they claim it has no relevance to today. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree with this point of view? Why or why not?

a. Were you able to see or make any connections between what you learned in this class and the way things are today? If so, what? If not, please explain.

4. The school year is almost over. Can you share at least one lesson or take away that feel you will be leaving this class with?

IV. Impact of information presented

1. Would you say you think or act any differently because of the things you learned from your teacher? If so, how?

2. Do you think taking this class made you take your education more seriously than you did before, less seriously or about the same? Please tell me more about this.

Probe:

a. What did you learn that made you feel this way?

3. What were your views on activism (e.g. protesting, demonstrating, rallying) before taking this class?

Probe:

a. Has this changed in any way since taking this class? If so, how? What did you learn that made you feel this way?

4. Are there any other ways you think you act any differently outside of school because of the things you learned in this class?

Probe:

a. Is there anything you don't do now because of taking this class?

b. Anything you do do now because of taking this class?

c. Are you involved in any organizations, volunteerism, activism, etc. because of taking this class?

d. Has taking these classes perhaps increased your desire to if you don't already? Can you give some examples?

5. Has taking this class inspired or empowered you in any way? If so, in what ways and what is that you learned that made you feel this way? If not, please explain why not.

6. How did you feel about being Black/African American before taking this class?
 - a. Has this changed in any way since taking this class? If so, how? Why?
 - b. Do you find yourself interacting with other African Americans any differently than you did before because of what you learned in these classes? If so, how?
 - c. Do you think you feel any proud of being African American than you did before? If so, why?

7. Do you feel closer to other Blacks/African America since taking this class? If so, in what way? Why?
 - a. Do you feel a stronger sense of being a part of the Black community because of the things you learned in these classes?

8. Has taking this class changed the way you think of white people?
Probe:
 - a. If so, how? Why?
 - b. If not, what are your views of whites?
 - b. Do you interact with Whites any differently now because of the things you've learned in these courses? If so, please give examples.

V. Recommendations for teaching AA history

1. What five qualities do you think makes a great African American history teacher?

2. What are five things (e.g. teaching strategies/techniques) a teacher can do to make learning about African American meaningful and/or engaging for students? In other words, to make students want to learn about African American history and think it's relevant?

VI. Closing

1. Is there a question I should ask you that I didn't?
2. Is there anything you would like to share about your experiences taking this class or learning about African American history in general that I did not ask about?
3. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX B

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Background

1. Let's start with background questions. Where are you originally from?

2. Did you pursue higher education to become a teacher? Please explain.

3. Why did you become a teacher?

Probe:

- a. Which subject did you enjoy teaching most and why?
- b. What do you like most about teaching and why?
- b. What would you say is/has been the greatest challenge in teaching for you?

4. How long have you worked in the field of education?

Probe:

- a. What roles have you served in, when, and if applicable, what grades and/or subjects?
- b. Where were these positions?
- c. Have you worked in any other fields besides education? If so, what and in what capacity?

5. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching? For example, what are your views as far as what teaching should look like and why?

6. When did you begin teaching at this school?

Probe:

- a. Did you always teach this class(es)?

7. In addition to teaching this class(es) what other responsibilities did you have at this school this year?

8. What aspects of your personal or professional experiences, if any, do you feel have prepared you to teach African American history?

9. Why do you think it's important for Black students to learn about African American history?

10. What do you think the objective should be in teaching Black students about African American history? Why?

II. The Curriculum

1. Can you tell me about the curriculum you use in your class?

Probe:

- a. Who created it?
- b. What are the overarching goals?
- c. How much input did you have in what topics you presented?

2. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest, how much input did the principal have in what you taught and/or how you taught the classes?

Probe (if had input):

- a. What specific things did he/she ask you to do?
- b. Did you implement all of his/her suggestions? Please explain.

3. Did you ever feel pressure to make sure you covered material in a certain amount of time?

Probe:

- a. If so, what was the source of this pressure? How did you respond?
- b. If not, why not?
- c. Were there any consequences for failing to cover certain information in an allotted time frame?

4. Did you have sole discretion in choosing the books and videos presented in the course?

Probe:

- a. How did you decide what kinds of text to have the students read this year?
- b. How do you feel about the way students engaged with these texts?
- c. If you did not have sole discretion, please explain.

5. Did you ever have to get videos, books or other materials approved by the principal?

Probe:

- a. If so, please give examples
- b. Was there ever a time you didn't get approval? If so, what and how did you respond?

6. What did you want your students to understand about the historical Black experience?

Probe:

- a. How do you feel you portrayed or wanted to portray the historical experiences of African Americans? Why?
- b. If you could go back in time, would you make any changes to what topics you talked about or how you talked about these topics?

7. If you were teaching this course next year, would you make any changes to the curriculum? If so, what changes would you have make and why?

III. Experience Teaching the Course

Next, I would like to ask you questions about what your goals were for the two classes, and how you feel about the way you taught the courses and the way your students engaged and performed in the courses.

1. To start, on a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you in how you taught African American history? Please explain.

2. What did you enjoy most about teaching African American history

Probe:

a. Did you experience any challenges? If so, what and how did you respond?

3. Do you think any aspect of your identity had a bearing on how you taught about the Black experience (e.g. gender, race religion, sexuality)? If so, please specify and explain.

4. What were your overarching goals in teaching about African American history?

5. How much of a priority was it for you to connect what they were learning about the past to contemporary issues, especially as they relate to the Black community?

Probe:

a. In what ways, if any, do you feel this manifested itself in the classroom? For example, if it was a priority, how did you try to help students make these connections?

b. How satisfied are you with helping students to make these connections?

c. To what extent do you feel students were able to make connections between the past and present? Why do you think this was? What are some connections you think they made and why?

6. How do you feel about the way students engaged with the course material?

a. How well do you feel they grasped the things you were trying to teach them?

b. Did students ever say anything or react in a way that surprised you? If so, please give an example of examples. Why did this surprise you?

7. Overall, how satisfied are you with how students performed in your class this year?

8. How do you hope your students have been impacted by taking your class?

9. What do you hope students will do with the knowledge they have gained this year?

10. Were there ever any topics or issues that you were reluctant to teach and/or talk about in your class? If so what and why?

11. Did you ever feel limited in what you could do or talk about in teaching the courses? If so, please give examples and explain why you felt constrained.
12. Did you ever receive feedback from your students about the class? If so, what was it and how did you respond?

Probe:

- a. From parents? If so what and how did you respond?
- b. The principal? If so what and how did you respond?

13. Do you have a memory that stands out to you from either or both classes? If so, what and why?

IV. Closing

1. Is there anything I should have asked you that I did not ask? If so, what?
2. Is there anything else about your experience teaching the class you would like to share?
3. Do you have questions for me?