

# ***Sankofa: A Narrative of a Native Son's Scholarly Homecoming***

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*This article explores my journey as a first-generation Black male matriculating to a research-intensive predominantly white institution (PWI): historically mired in integration struggles and battles over affirmative action. Employing theories of (in)visibility, I utilize scholarly personal narrative to analyze my feelings of alienation when exposed to microaggressions and inequities – to those of incorporation, leading to hypervisibility as a student-leader. After graduate degrees from a racially tense Ivy League institution, I returned “home” as a professor attempting to balance identities as a scholar, community servant, alumnus, and role model/mentor – with the veneer of cultural taxation. This narrative informs research on “homecomers” of color returning as faculty to their undergraduate institutions, and challenges the “vanishing” status of males of color in academe. Further, I invoke managed visibility as a strategy to inform survival and success in the academic realm; one that may prove useful for Black men in settings in which they vacillate between invisibility and hypervisibility.*

**Keywords:** Black, faculty, males, mentorship, scholarly personal narrative

*[T]he Negro boy I depicted in Native Son... is product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. (Wright, 1940, p. 18).*

In his essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” novelist Richard Wright (1940) discusses the reaction of Black professionals to the protagonist in his opus, *Native Son*. Wright notes,

Having narrowly escaped the Bigger Thomas reaction pattern themselves— indeed, still retaining traces of it within the confines of their own timid personalities—they would not relish being publicly reminded of the lowly, shameful depths of life above which they enjoyed their bourgeois lives. (p. 19)

In many ways, I think about my own scholarly path and how I too, retain traces of Bigger’s rebellion in my history. In this article, I will reflect on how my educational journey has greatly

been influenced by the vagaries of public policy trending toward a “colorblind” definition of merit, and the work of scholars and activists to counter this trend. The latest chapter in this journey finds me back at the site of my postsecondary beginnings, not as an anonymous undergraduate, but as a highly visible assistant professor. It is my goal to discuss this journey, not as a completed process, but one that is still emerging, evolving, and revealing a myriad of emotional and professional successes – and challenges.

### Methodology

The Akan of West Africa have a word, *sankofa*, which literally translates to “go back and fetch what you forgot.” *Sankofa* explains my methodological approach in this article, best exemplified in this definition:

*Sankofa* teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward. That is, we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated. (University of Illinois Springfield Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, n.d., para. 3)

In many ways, I have been crafting this narrative – reclaiming, reviving, and perpetuating experiences from my past – for years. When I walk to appointments across the 40-acre campus of The University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), I often think about the circuitous pathway I have traveled as a scholar. As this special issue is focused on “success,” I find myself somewhat uncomfortable with that appellation. Yet when I think about the deleterious educational outcomes for Black males in K-12 educational settings and predominantly White institutions of higher education, it is readily apparent that my experience is exceptional in many regards (Hooker & Johnson, 2011; Reddick & Heilig, 2012). Why is this so, when I, too, struggled with many of the challenges that confront a multitude of Black boys and men in educational settings? Discussions on this topic are often shared with other Black men, who can relate to isolation and hypervisibility in our schooling (Baldwin, Fidler, & Patton, 2009; Cuyjet, 2009). I also find receptive audiences with Latino *hermanos* who similarly chart a like course (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012), and of course, with Black sister scholars who are also familiar with the slings and arrows afforded to us in the educational realm (Thompson & Louque, 2005).

On occasion, I share aspects of the experience with White allies. Sometimes the stories are met with skepticism – even among allies, the assumptions about my educational experiences, family values, and class status are often incorrect. Nevertheless, I believe the ultimate outcome is one of adding dimensionality to my identity. For years, I have sought ways to integrate these narratives into scholarship. Through this search, I happened upon the work of Robert J. Nash, the inventor of *scholarly personal narrative* (SPN). Nash (2004) terms SPN as “a ‘counter-narrative’ to the faceless, de-contextualized research paradigm that has dominated scholarship in the professional schools for much of the past century” (p. vii).

The aptness of this method for my work can be found in Nash’s (2004) own words, when he observes that SPN has aided people of color who “have had to suppress their strong, distinct voices along with their anger, for years in the academy” (p. 2). This particular method of narrative inquiry shares commonality with other forms of autoethnography, such as Ruth Behar’s (1996) “vulnerable anthropology,” Margaret Willard-Traub’s (2001) “scholarly memoir,” and

Corrine Glesne's (1998) "autobiographical ethnography." SPN, however, "takes qualitative research one major step further [putting] the *self* of the scholar front and center...with the overarching goal of "mak[ing] narrative sense of personal experience" (Nash, 2004, p. 18). SPN motivates scholars "to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers" and to "challenge and reconstruct older political or educational narratives" (Nash, 2004, p. 18). With this charge, I embrace SPN as a way to utilize my experience as a unit of analysis for translating the personal to a larger polity, following in the scholarly tradition of scholars of color that have used their journeys to make meaning of the academic landscape (see Boyd, Cintrón, & Alexander-Snow, 2010; Espina, Muñoz, & Kiyama, 2010; Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Murakami-Ramalho, Nuñez, & Cuero, 2010; Turner, 2013).

### Theoretical Frameworks

I anchor this article theoretically in Merton's (1968) definition of visibility as social reality: in his words, visibility is the extent to which performance in a role can be readily observed by others. A more modern conceptualization can be found in the work of Roberts, Roberts, O'Neill, and Blake-Beard (2008) who expand the definition by noting visibility as "the extent to which a person's attributes and/or behaviors are a focal object of others' attention in a particular situation or context." Roberts et al. make a critical addition in stating "those who have more visibility are subjected to more public attention, whereas those who have less visibility receive less focused attention" (p. 427). Thus, (in)visibility is a spectrum, varying from the hypervisible to the invisible – and parallels my educational trajectory from moments of public acclaim, and conversely, variants of humiliation to epochs of imperceptibility, with every degree in between.

Hypervisibility, also termed "supravisibility" by Brighenti (2007), is a "paradoxical double bind that forbids you to do what you are simultaneously required to do by the whole ensemble of social constraints" (p. 330). Using the popular reality show *The Apprentice* and two of its most well-known Black contestants, Kwame Jackson and Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth as examples, Blake-Beard and Roberts (2004) applied the management of visibility to persons of color in the workplace, noting that a "double bind" exists for minorities who "adopt these visibility strategies of standing out and blending in" (pp. 1-2). I harbor the psychological damage of having my worth essentialized to a test score; and being stereotyped as a low achiever, prone to violence, and lacking in innate intelligence, honesty, and drive. Much like the Native American Ivy Leaguers profiled in Brayboy's (2004) research, I have often experienced invisibility (i.e., having aspects of my culture ignored or belittled) and hypervisibility (i.e., having my cultural practices questioned in public ways) throughout my educational journey.

As a slightly less-than-new scholar, I am all too familiar with the consequences of negotiating visibility. As Brighenti's (2007) notes, visibility is "a double-edged sword: it can be empowering as well as disempowering" (p. 335). In the text of my narrative, readers will see how being initially buffeted by the winds of (in)visibility wreaked havoc on my psyche as a younger man; however, at age 40, I am learning a lesson from my mentors and peers – how to leverage the varying states of my visibility to my advantage; knowing when to "step up" and "fall back." By naming visibility as a pervasive state in my educational path, the reader can better follow the stages of my history, and how intensive mentoring, fortuitous circumstances, and even the commensurate efforts of my mentors – and even me, have conspired to situate me in same profession as role models like Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. His own public humiliation at

the hands of a police officer in 2009 (Dyson, 2009; Stripling, 2009), reminds me, however, that our relative (in)visibility fails to provide Black male faculty protection or immunity, as it may for others.

### Discussion

#### Formative Years

I was born on the 18th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) at the now defunct Webb Air Force Base, in Big Spring, Texas. Unsurprisingly, my first classroom was at home, where I can remember my mother Beverly and father Richard exhorting me to “find something to do” – idleness was a major infraction at the Reddick house. My parents were “unconventional academics”: though they did not attend college and hold degrees, they held education as a sacrosanct concept. In addition, my mother’s emigration to the UK from Jamaica to pursue her schooling left an impression upon me. I grew up with the West Indian belief that educational attainment would be wholly a consequence of my hard work and ability (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Lowenthal, 1972). My maternal grandfather Karl Bryan, whom I have been told throughout my life that I resemble in temperament and thought, worked for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and thus, we always had the most up-to-date references in our house. Considering the effort and cost of these tomes to my parents, it is not surprising that any query concerning how the car engine worked or the order of the planets was met with, “Look it up in the encyclopedia!” I would often meander to other entries, building a love of trivia and knowledge that would later serve me well as a *Jeopardy!* champion (Hough, 2011). Emergent research experiences, I suppose.

Another defining characteristic of my early years was growing up in an Air Force family as the son of a career noncommissioned officer. I am proud to be a military “brat,” and I identify with the subculture of constant moves and new schools. My father’s exacting discipline, from the way I sat in a chair, the way I addressed my elders and presented my schoolwork, to the cleanliness of my room and clothing—left an indelible mark on me. When reflecting on my academic journey, I have noted the emergent narratives linking the structure and discipline of military life to instilling an unwavering work ethic and standard of excellence among Black men. Heisman Trophy winner and Washington Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III, born in Okinawa to Army parents, has said, “By no means was my upbringing normal. My parents were stricter than most...once I got into high school I knew what I was doing was not normal because everyone was talking about it” (Chavar, 2012). Former NBA MVP Shaquille O’Neal similarly discussed his Army stepfather’s influence: “My father joined the Army when I was two so he could make a better living and also so he could get us out of the ‘hood” (as cited in Asfar, 2009, para 4). A rebellious youth, O’Neal’s stepfather steered him on course to success:

According to *Sports Illustrated*, and O’Neal’s own autobiography, life as a military brat was difficult, but ultimately his Army stepfather helped him reverse course. Once overseas in West Germany, he continued to rebel (getting in fights, hitting teachers, breaking into cars, etc.) in hopes that he’d be sent back to the States. However, Philip Harrison put an end to that dream, telling Shaquille, “Look, son, no matter what you do, I’m not letting them send you back. And if you don’t listen to me I’m going to beat your butt. Every ... single ... day.” (Asfar, 2009, para. 5)

My transitory youth was punctuated with two extended tours, totaling ten years, in the United Kingdom. My sister Shanmatee and I were afforded the opportunity that typically is presented to the immensely privileged —growing up overseas, in a diverse cultural milieu, dealing with difference from our earliest days. Some of the traits that I suspect have assisted me in my own career-resilience, strong social skills, an appreciation for diversity, and strong propensity to service—have been linked to “brats” in studies (Ender, 2002). By my count, I spent seven of my 13 years of primary and secondary schools as a pupil in Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DODDS). In recent years, DODDS have garnered the attention of researchers for the high expectations held by teachers for all students, including Black and Latinos, and the narrowness of the achievement gap (Bridglall & Gordon, 2003; Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001).

I knew this as a DODDS student: all of my teachers were “old” (the faculty were as permanent and non-changing as the building itself) and discipline problems were minimal. It was also an education supplemented with field trips, host nation courses, and a real sense of history (my elementary school was a Quonset hut, and my middle school was rumored to have been a prisoner of war camp for captured German soldiers during World War II). The 30-mile daily commute to my elementary school took me through the rural Cotswold countryside to the colleges of Oxford University. I was not a perfect student, but I recall the “smart kids” of my age group—a multiracial group, comprised of White, Asian, Latino, and Black children. While I do recall that many of the kids who struggled in school were of color, the only real cleavage in diversity among the high achievers was our parents’ occupation. I distinctly recall that among the talented and gifted groups, only a handful of us were the children of noncommissioned officers (NCOs). The majority of kids in that group were “officer’s kids”—meaning that their parents typically held college degrees.

Our family received our PCS (“permanent change of station”) orders in 1986, just after I started my freshman year in high school. I certainly received a rude awakening trying to adjust to Austin, Texas schools where virtually all the high achieving kids were White, and virtually all the kids of color were relegated to the “average” or “at-risk” track. My mother regularly visited the school to confront counselors on why I had been pulled from my junior ROTC class and placed in basketball. It seemed that these new schools were diverse, but the honors classes were not. Aside from being mocked because of my bizarre hybrid ‘Amer-English’ accent, I also was isolated because I did not fit the majority of my Black and Latino male counterparts: I was interested in books, nonathletic, and not at all fashion-savvy—factors potentially exacerbated by my globally nomadic childhood (Musil, 2006).

While I grew up keenly understanding the threat of nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Warsaw Pact, I initially had no idea why there was a nursery and childcare center attached to my school (I soon learned that Travis County had one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation; Smith, 2011). More worrisome was the sense that the school environment was not safe: gang activity and drug dealing were openly discussed, and the burglar bars on the windows and vending machines reiterated that crime was part and parcel of the schooling experience. I also slowly started to retreat into anonymity. Standing out, or least the ways I did—for being a “nerd,” or wearing a junior ROTC uniform to school—was not something I relished. The tropes and stereotypes available to Black male youth did not fit, and I actively rejected them. For the first time, I started to view school as an obstacle rather than an enjoyable experience, and my hypervisibility led to a desire to become more or less invisible. I found a sympathetic Latino ex-Marine assistant principal, Mr. Jaime, who would allow me to spend afternoons in his office

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discussing life in the military—and of course, avoiding going to class. Ironically, the event that jolted me out of complacency was something I initially resisted—changing schools once again.

In 1988, court-ordered busing came to an end in Austin, and students were sent to neighborhood schools (Cuban, 2008). I was re-assigned to Johnston High School in East Austin, which had a reputation as a low-performing, gang-infested school. My parents and I exhausted a multitude of appeals and reluctantly resigned ourselves to attending yet another failing school. Despondently, I attended a community forum at Johnston to learn more about our new home. The principal, Irma Novoa, spoke with great pride about the community at Johnston, how the school was unfairly portrayed in the media, and that we would grow to love the experience. Certainly, I admired her energy, but remained skeptical.

A few weeks into the school year, Ms. Novoa challenged me to stand in front of my peers and introduce the city orchestra to the student body at an assembly. “I think you have leadership potential,” she remarked. “I see you in your uniform, and other kids respect you. I want you to do this.” I didn’t quite believe her, and I tried to find a way out, but Ms. Novoa was adamant that I make the introduction, as a favor to her. Resigned, I trotted out to the gym floor a few days later, uttered a hastily written speech, and observed the orchestra from the wings. Nobody booed, in fact, a number of people remarked that I had done a good job. I received probably the first of many bear hugs from Ms. Novoa, and a phrase I would hear her say many more times over the next two years, “I’m so proud of you!” My reluctance to be in the spotlight was challenged by the moderate praise I received from my peers, and the enthusiasm of the caring adults in the school. Being visible, this time, did not cause pain.

Two more teachers, Ms. Pat ten Broeke and Ms. Janet Elbom, used the same approach to convince me to join the debate team and the yearbook staff, respectively. I gradually became more comfortable with the visibility that these activities afforded as well as navigating the complex social environment at Johnston. There were few cliques; the cultural milieu was truly diverse, ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and even along aspirational lines. Among my group of friends were those tangentially involved in criminal activities— but they were also good sons, brothers, and fathers. I had friends applying to Ivy League schools and those who aimed for good paying jobs in HVAC repair. The unique sociocultural context of Johnston was not simply one I had observed. Years later, as an editor of the *Harvard Educational Review*, I was stunned to see that a scholar had submitted a manuscript entitled “The Black-Latino Dance at Johnston High School.” In the pages, I read how an ethnographer similarly viewed my high school experience:

Because of the historical aspects of the eastside community in Austin and its relationship to Johnston, and the history of the Black and Chicano relationship at Johnston, the stage has been set for a unique school community.... Since Austin desegregated its public schools, Johnston has been a place where Black, Chicano, and White students could have a dialogue and establish an understanding of one another. (“Black-Latino Dance,” p. 4)

I thrived in this truly diverse school setting: my mostly White, affluent friends from Northwest Austin shared “college knowledge” and alerted me to SAT preparation classes; at the same time, I studied trigonometry with my Southeast Asian friends, noting their collaborative approach to problem sets (and quickly learning that to get answers, one had to give answers). My teachers did not shy away from political discussions, or the ramifications of attending Johnston High on our future: we were taught to be aware of the prejudices and inattention given to East

Austin and the Latino community and empowered with confidence and the “Pride of the East Side.” I remember one of my teachers, Ms. Carol Hovland, working to invite civil rights activist Cesar Chavez to visit our school and my classmates and me joining Mr. Chavez and United Farm Workers on a march to the state capitol. Spending time with Mr. Chavez was electrifying; his calm yet steely demeanor served as a good example to teenagers accustomed to being underestimated. These vignettes connect to a conversation I had with my mentor, sociologist Dr. Charles V. Willie many years later, when he told me that I was an example of his theory of marginality (Willie, 1994). Reflecting on my formative years, I see evidence of how I came to be one that could see beyond my own worldview, and transcend my own ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and national identity while working with a diverse population.

Ms. Novoa’s purposeful intervention in my academic career continued when one day, I was summoned to the principal’s office. Unbeknownst to me, she had commandeered the UT-Austin admissions counselor’s schedule, and inserted three additional candidates for him to interview (I later learned that the counselor’s plan was to offer one scholarship; he ended offering all four of us five-year scholarships, which I was told was the highest number of any school in the state that year). I was satisfied with a full scholarship to the university, but Carol Hovland challenged me to apply to the competitive honors college-within-a-college, Plan II. I was surprised to learn of my acceptance and left Johnston High School proud, energized, and ready to take on the nation’s largest university by storm.

### **Undergraduate Years at UT-Austin**

Whatever confidence I had as a high school graduate was quickly chipped away during my first year at UT-Austin. I was uneasy around my precocious honors classmates, who seemed to fit in much better to the seminar structure. I wanted to be invisible and not be noticed, however, the intersectional nature of my race, ethnicity, gender, and class identity meant that I stood out. While I don’t recall any particular incidents where my classmates made me uncomfortable, I was uncomfortable by dint of being so unlike anyone else in my classes. The times outside of classes were a different story. There, I dealt with prejudice and discrimination on a fairly regular basis. Never overt or overwhelmingly noxious, I later learned that I was mired in a microaggressive environment (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). I dealt with the stereotypes that every Black man in America encounters—people moving away from me in elevators, fearful that this 145-pound Black beanpole would do them harm—but also more incisive and hurtful attacks. They usually started thusly:

White Student: What’s your major?

Me: Plan II Honors. I think I might want to concentrate in public relations, though.

White Student: *Plan II?* Really? That’s pretty awesome. *Hey, what was your SAT score?*

Invariably these discussions would devolve into either a rant about how the student had a higher SAT score and was rejected by Plan II, or how they had a friend that had suffered that fate. Ultimately, the implicit message was that I had not earned a spot as much as I had been given one, as an “affirmative action case.” The environment for students of color at UT-Austin in the early 1990s was in many ways toxic: debates over merit and who should be educated at the

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state's flagship institution invariably deteriorated to simple insinuations that Black and Latino students were undeserving of seats at the university. In particular, right-wing groups like the College Republicans and the Young Conservatives of Texas (YCT) used op-eds and stunts like "affirmative action bake sales" to further poison the atmosphere. I suspect I fell victim to stereotype threat: hearing these damaging tropes indeed weakened my confidence and resolve (Steele 1997, 1999). My own academic performance was poor, landing me on scholastic probation, which put my scholarship and Plan II membership at risk. For a time, I thought that the naysayers were perhaps right in assuming that I did not belong.

There were "pockets of hope" (de los Reyes & Gozempa, 2002) in my journey, however. The emerging Afro-centrism of hip-hop served as a bulwark against microaggressions, and I scheduled classes around *Rap City* on BET, gaining intellectual stimulation from the works of Public Enemy, Gang Starr, X-Clan, and Queen Latifah. I also discovered the music of Living Colour, a Black rock band whose song "Pride" served as a mantra of sorts for me during college:

When I speak out loud, you say I'm crazy  
When I'm feeling proud, you say I'm lazy  
I look around and see the true reality  
You like our hair, you love our music  
Our culture's large, so you abuse it  
Take time to understand, I'm an equal man. (Calhoun, 1990, track 3)

A secession of mentors helped me resurrect my confidence: Ms. Brenda Burt, who encouraged me to get involved in orientation and support services for students of color; Dr. Ricardo Romo, who taught civil rights history and demonstrated to me that there was a path to preserving one's cultural identity and success at the university; and Ms. Karen Bordelon, who never let me feel ashamed of being an honors student on scholastic probation—and further felt I would excel in the program despite this rocky start. These mentors, and many of my near-peers and peers re-awoke my scholarly passion and identity. I gained a reputation for my work as a student leader, and in turn found the confidence to not define myself solely by my GPA. In four years, I had come from scholastic probation to university-wide and national honors as a student leader. The belief that others showed in me severed the chains of insecurity and allowed me to gain confidence in myself. Much like my high school years, I started off weakly and finished strong.

The storm clouds threatening campus diversity were emerging, however. The University of Texas at Austin, once the flashpoint for the integration of PWIs in *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950, was soon to be a battleground once again in *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996), one year after my graduation. The dualism of my experience was exemplified in the words of UT-Austin law professor Lino Graglia—a man whom I had once debated at an affirmative action panel—when he stated, "Blacks and Mexican-Americans can't compete academically with Whites" because they come from cultures in which "failure is not looked upon with disgrace" (as cited in Verhovek, 1997, para. 6), a line of argument he continues to this day (Miller, 2012). While UT-Austin represented unimagined vistas of opportunity for me, Graglia's comments were and continue to be a painful reminder that those opportunities exacted a significant psychological toll for me and for many of my peers of color.



### Doctoral Study at Harvard

I spent two years teaching fourth grade and middle school in inner city Houston—without question the most challenging job I'd ever faced. I felt, however, my impact would be best made in a higher education setting, so I applied and was accepted to the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to fashion a master's of education program that would allow me to work in the field of student affairs.

Reflecting on common themes in my life trajectory, I have noticed that I connect to critically important mentors almost instantly when I reached a new setting – Ms. Novoa at Johnston High, Ms. Brenda Burt at The University of Texas at Austin, and Ms. Eunice Alexander at my school in Houston. At HGSE, it was no different. I moved with my fiancée to Cambridge, and encountered a young woman who would not only serve as a wonderful friend and peer mentor, but who would also broker introductions to two of the most impactful mentors in my life—Dr. Frank Tuitt and Dr. Charles V. Willie. A close friend saw the potential for mentorship and collaboration with me and these great men, and she, in some ways, forced them to happen. Both Dr. Tuitt and Dr. Willie encompassed my master's experience at Harvard, and four years later, when Dr. Tuitt invited me to visit Harvard, and Dr. Willie invited me to collaborate on a book project as a doctoral student, it seemed divine.

However, the Harvard I returned to had changed. In the late 90s, faculty of color were a small, but visible population at HGSE. In 2001, a number of these promising scholars that invigorated and inspired me were no longer there. In many ways, my doctoral study was a pursuit of that question. My initial adviser, Dr. Stacy Blake-Beard, a Black woman with research interests parallel to mine, left at the end of my first year; fortunately, I worked for a time with a long-serving Black male professor, Dr. Bob Peterkin, until I ultimately elected to work alongside Dr. Bridget Terry Long. Dr. Long, an economist immersed in quantitative research, seemed like an unorthodox choice for me, a critical scholar ensconced in phenomenological qualitative research. However, it was an easy decision. As office neighbors, Dr. Long always had time for me, and demonstrated care and concern for my being as well as my career. She cared for my *soul* as well as my research (Tuitt & Carter, 2008) and pushed me to my absolute limit as a doctoral student.

No matter how strong I felt my own support system was, I was still intensely concerned with the “revolving door,” as my colleagues termed it, of faculty of color at HGSE. It made little sense to us that an institution with such great resources could be so deficient in attracting and retaining a diverse faculty. The HGSE of the late 90s had undergone significant self-examination, with faculty members Drs. Karen Mapp and Susan Moore Johnson (1997) authoring a working paper on the racial climate with recommendations from all members of the community. The commitment to that work, it seemed, had waned. We also believed that we needed to act as students and alumni of color to ensure that the institution maintained its commitment to our respective communities.

My fellow graduate students and I took this commitment seriously, in our activities on campus mentoring and leading student of color organizations and in our scholarship. We harnessed our visibility by working collectively to establish an Alumni of Color Conference in 2003, where we invited alumni who fit our definition of scholars and activists. As taxing and draining as this work was for all of us, it was simultaneously sustaining and gave us energy as well as hope to see our role models and mentors return to the campus as exemplars of educational praxis. I consider this work, and the friendships forged in the process, as

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foundational to my identity as a scholar. Noting inequities isn't enough, nor is ensuring that the individual is comfortable. Entire communities deserve to have the playing field leveled, and that only happens when those of us privileged to access valuable educational and social capital democratize it so others also have that access. We leveraged this capital to bring visibility to the accomplishments of our alumni, as well as our concerns about the paucity of diversity among the faculty.

I return to HGSE on a fairly regular basis, to support the work of the new generation of scholar activists in residence and connect with old friends and colleagues, celebrating the tenth anniversary of our collective action (Weber, 2012). I also bring my own students, so that they can see the power of student activism, and to demystify the ivy-clad walls to reveal that the institution is truly dependent on the talents and voices of its students—and their work focused on the experiences and maximizing opportunities for communities of color has a receptive audience, regardless of what well- and not-so well-meaning scholars may say.

### **Life in the Academy**

The conclusion of my narrative, in many ways, is actually a beginning. I am literally back where I started, and I regularly marvel at this journey. I am in many ways the least likely among my friends and peers to return to UT-Austin as a professor. It took me some time to find my academic footing, and I have had the occasion to collaborate as a colleague with my former mentors and professors. Having the career of my dreams, in my hometown, surrounded by my family, is a quite surreal experience. I am fortunate to have a colleague, Victor Sáenz, similarly situated; we have collaborated on the topic of our “homecoming” experience (Reddick & Sáenz, 2012; Reddick, Oseguera, Rodriguez, & Sáenz, 2011).

Old canards about navigating the academy typically don't work well for faculty of color, but they are especially inadequate for homecoming faculty. Regarding service, many of us are advised to take the “Nancy Reagan approach”—that is, “just say no” (Reddick, 2012). We are often called and asked to perform service in communities and organizations that helped us reach our professional and personal best; it would send a terrible message to youth that an alumnus of the school, or professional from the community was “too busy” to visit or share his/her story. In fairness, I think many of my colleagues and mentors understand this. I have received significant support in my program, department, and college regarding the protection of my time.

Another tension among homecoming junior faculty of color is becoming an institutional agent. Whether we like it or not, we are often assumed to be in concert with the institutional direction and goals of our universities, and vice-versa. If one critiques institutional policies and actors, is there a danger of not being seen as a good colleague? How does one scrutinize and produce scholarship that may in fact challenge or chastise the institution? This dynamic takes on an entirely new dimension when one considers that the state capitol, in UT-Austin's case, is four blocks south of my office. Without the security of tenure, one is reminded of the proverbial cautionary tale of sunflowers—don't stand too high, or your head will get cut off.

The enhanced visibility of being an alumnus, of color, on the faculty, escalates one's visibility significantly. Often, I meet faculty members and administrators who greet me with, “Oh, I've heard about you!” I am left to wonder: did you hear of me from my research or teaching, or was I simply a stock character in a grand narrative about the institution's commitment to diversity? I admire my alma mater's efforts to come to terms with its racist history; on the other hand, there is this exclusionary and discriminating thread that runs

throughout my experience as a student, alumnus, and faculty member. I maintain a Du Boisian (1903) double consciousness about this aspect of my identity. While I am grateful for the opportunities that I encountered in the university community, I also maintain that many of these opportunities emerged in spite of some experiences, and others, through the hard work of mentors, peers, and my own efforts. Even as I write this, the wounds from *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) and *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996) are being reopened, with the Supreme Court opting to hear *Fisher v. University of Texas*. Once again, the campus that is “home” to me will become the latest battleground between those who are working to ensure equitable educational opportunities exist for all, and those who, in the words of Columbia University president Lee Bollinger, are “threaten[ing] to undo several decades of effort within higher education to build a more integrated and just and educationally enriched environment” (as cited in Liptak, 2012, para. 5).

### **An Inconclusive Conclusion**

Since I entered the academy, I have spent copious amounts of time talking with Black male scholars in high schools, community colleges, universities, and graduate schools about how I have navigated the experience. The totality of my educational journey points to a number of key interventions that are worthy of note. My family serves as the foundation of all of my endeavors: the prioritization of learning and the written word; a strong cultural link to academic achievement and witnessing the personal sacrifices of my mother in pursuing education; and the experience of embracing diversity via travel and living internationally as a consequence of my father’s military career. Ten years in an excellent K-12 schooling system provided tremendous advantages, and made my parents and me aware when the educational experience did not meet these standards in my inner-city schools in the U.S.—the realization of the need for involvement.

College exposed me to the nefarious cycles of stereotype threat and racial microaggressions, assailing the armor from my previous schooling and mentoring experiences. Connecting to a strong Black identity via cultural movements in hip-hop, and seeking out vital mentors of color armored me for ascent. At the same time, political and social movements coalesced on my campus and provided me undeniable evidence of the fortitude of those determined to advocate a “colorblind” version of the American experience disengaged from the reality of educational inequity that I had observed as a student and teacher. Graduate school was a period of inspired activism for me, where I learned that the academy could in fact be a site of resistance and hope. Peers and mentors showed me how research could be molded into *praxis* for social change. Our collective efforts influenced the trajectory of a top-ranked educational institution, and still have an impact today (Brown, 2012).

As a professor, I simultaneously hold the mantles of teacher, researcher, community servant, role model—and most importantly, father to Karl and Katherine and husband to Sherry. Furthermore, I conduct this work at the institution and city, which in many ways led me to resist and advance a counterhegemonic educational and research agenda, but also inspired and nurtured my academic development. I have endeavored to make these dissonant experiences an aspect of my research, and utilized the methods I learned throughout my education to produce rigorous scholarship on the experiences of Black families, mentorship, the role of HBCUs in the twenty-first century, the effects of cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994) on Black faculty, and the negotiation of work-family balance for fathers in the academy. At the same time, I am cognizant of Audre Lorde’s (1984) exhortation that “the master’s tools will never bring down the master’s house” (p.

112). I am working diligently, under the tutelage and direction of so many inspiring scholars *both* inside and outside the academy, to heed this sage advice.

The strategies for negotiating visibility advocated by Blake-Beard and Roberts (2004) serve as a critical component in my efforts to retain my sense of self—after all, Amos Wilson's (1990) comment that “to be a Black male is to have your integrity chronically under question, to always have to somehow verbally or nonverbally, communicate convincing reasons for being where you are if you are not in your ‘place’” (p. 36) holds true for me. Blake-Beard and Roberts discuss *tempered visibility* as the ability to know what battles to pick, and which to concede to win the war; relying on competence and character as defining traits, rather than stereotypes; knowing how to translate needs and concerns to multiple constituents; and establishing a reputation for detecting systemic inequity and injustice in organizations while working in a constructive manner to address these ills.

My narrative also speaks to the need for greater investigation of the discipline and personal accountability inherent in the military “brat” experience. An emerging body of narrative accounts from famed Black male successes such as Shaquille O’Neal and Robert Griffin III provides evidence that Black men credit this environment with instilling a sense of regulation and responsibility (Asfar, 2009; Chavar, 2012; O’Neal & McCallum, 1993). The narrow Black-White achievement gaps and high expectations of teachers in Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DODDS) is also deserving of further investigation (Smrekar, Gutherie, Owens, & Sims, 2001; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

*Sankofa* is an apt framing of my experience, for I have returned to the site of simultaneous pain and progress for Black academics. I am cognizant of the nomadic and transitory nature of my youth; my nuclear family and my memory are my “hood,” while I have adopted the site of my adolescence as a home of sorts. I derive strength and inspiration in being connected to youth in my native Austin, demonstrating that education is a viable means of progress that does not necessarily mean sacrificing one’s identity. I’m not interested in (literally) whitewashing my experiences as a young man; rather, I use them as text to understand the multifaceted, intersectional nature of my Blackness in America today. Unlike the Black professionals that Wright (1940) critiques for losing consciousness of their sense of rebellion and rage, my will is to channel it into my research, teaching, and existence to assist Black males and other members of the community of color to reach their educational, and human, potential.

I endorse the investigation of Black male successes such as those in this volume—for too long we have been depicted as atypical, as others have presented our stories. Young Black males have been deprived of authentic stories of achievement and resistance. In making my, and other Black male narratives of success visible, we are rewriting the dominant discourse, demonstrating for the youth “looking and feeling for a way out” (Wright, 1940, p. 18).

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