



## APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Strange Fruit: Experience and Survivorship of Black Women Graduate Students at University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)

Name of Candidate: Ashley Jenae Black

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Thesis and Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_

Dr. Brandy Harris-Wallace

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Health  
Administration & Policy

Date Approved:

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: Strange Fruit: Experience and Survivorship of Black Women Graduate Students at University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)

Ashley Jenae Black

Directed by: Dr. Brandy Harris-Wallace

This qualitative research study explores the experiences of Black women graduate students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). As suggested by the existing literature, the study of Black women's experiences from an intersectional perspective is still emergent, especially in education research. The goal of this study is to contribute to the literature by using the voices of Black women graduate students to explore their complex experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) like UMBC from their point of view. Specifically, the aims of this study were threefold: (1) To understand campus climate from the perspective of Black women graduate students; (2) To assess the impact these perceptions and experiences, if any, on academic achievement, social connectedness, and professional development; and (3) To examine whether there is support for the theory that Black women need additional, unique interventions to be better prepared to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and professionally in PWIs like UMBC. Using the Black Feminist theoretical framework as the foundation and a neo-positive approach, the qualitative responses of eighteen (18) survey participants and five (5) semi-structured, phenomenological interviews were analyzed. Findings

indicate that Black women graduate students regularly experience discrimination and microaggressions on campus, seek deeper relationships with faculty, and consistently navigate hypervisibility and invisibility, and must take the initiative to cultivate communities of support. Consistent with existing literature, it emerged that Black women graduate students have a need for unique interventions, even if they are excelling academically.

STRANGE FRUIT: EXPERIENCE AND SURVIVORSHIP OF BLACK WOMEN  
GRADUATE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY  
(UMBC)

Ashley Jenae Black

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## INTRODUCTION

The experiences of Black women are largely shaped by stereotypes that have been perpetuated for centuries, exacerbated by the Black woman's unique position at the juncture of race, sex and class (Collins, 2002). Perceptions of strength, independence, and anger, which follow an extended history of needing to perform as strong to survive, often result in the exclusion of Black women from interventions and perpetuates the need for this performance, as suggested by Wallace (1978) and Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009). For example, during the 2014-15 school year, Black men and women 25 years or older have only one percentage point difference in attainment of a high school diploma, 87.2 percent and 88.2 percent, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Additionally, in 2015, dropout rates for the two groups were reported as only having about one tenth of a percentage difference, with Black men at 6.4 percent and Black women slightly higher at 6.5 (NCES, 2017). In 2014-15, Black women represented about 6.5 percent of the population and 65 percent of African Americans with a bachelor's degree. Black men represented 3.6 percent of the population. However, despite the above evidence of both Black men and women demonstrating a similar amount of need, the highly publicized and heavily funded initiatives surrounding strengthening educational attainment by providing interventions, such as mentoring, are focused almost exclusively on Black men. From Urban Preparatory School in Chicago to former President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative, there are numerous organizations and programs working to support Black men. Though the Obama Administration developed interventions for girls internationally with the Let Girls Learn initiative, and encouraged students from all backgrounds to continue their education after the completion of high school with "Reach Higher," it remains to be seen how these programs address the distinct plight experienced by Black women. This exclusion further extends to education research, where there is a dearth of works that take an intersectional

approach and explore the experiences and outcomes of Black women specifically, as opposed to considering race and gender as independent indicators (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). As put forth by Chavous and Cogburn (2007), when discussing Black women, it is rare to find research that explores how they achieve at higher rates, what their experiences are, or how they navigate those experiences on-campus, all of which may impact success following graduation. Thus, there remains a gap in the literature exploring Black women's experiences, particularly those guided by their voices. Using the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) as a case, the following research seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring Black women graduate students' complex experiences in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education from their point of view.

#### *Statement of Problem and Research Aims*

Black women often face the erasure of their experiences and voices, particularly in education research (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). Recording and analyzing the experiences of Black women graduate students at UMBC contributes to existing education literature by centering Black women's voices in the exploration of how they persist in particularly hostile academic environments like predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Specifically, the aims of this research are three-fold: (1) to understand campus climate from the perspective of Black women graduate students; (2) to assess the impact these perceptions and experiences have, if any, on academic achievement, social connectedness, and professional development; and (3) to examine whether there is support for the theory that Black women need additional, unique interventions to be better prepared to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and professionally in PWIs of higher education, like UMBC. The literature spotlights mentorship as a key intervention (Bartman, 2015; Grant and Simmons, 2008; Patton and Harper, 2003) and is also highlighted in this work.

## BACKGROUND

### *Significance*

There has been a recent shift in the socio-political landscape of the United States that marks this work a particularly relevant. With the end of the Obama era's largely silent and deadly racism that worked in concert with the popular narrative that the U.S. is a "color-blind, post-racial society," came a reversion to greater social acceptance of blatant discrimination and prejudice. According to the Anti-Defamation League, there has been a surge in racist incidents on college campuses with at least 153 racist incidents on 108 campuses, across 34 states during the 2016-17 school year (Sidner, 2017). In 2016, with the election of President Donald Trump, there was also a rise in the number of hate groups (Ganim, Welch and Meyerson, 2017). Further, as a result of a number of high profile race-based murders and other acts of discrimination in succession over the last five years, movements like Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName which are primarily initiated and maintained by Black women, are forcing uncomfortable conversations about racism and patriarchy, both within and outside of the Black community (Black Lives Matter, 2017; Day, 2015). Simultaneously, there is a Black-woman driven appreciation of self and achievement, as seen with trends like #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackGirlsGraduate and the mainstream distribution and success of movies like "Hidden Figures," and "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," that detail Black women's contributions that went unacknowledged for decades. Further, Black women are becoming increasingly visible, with swelling representation in film (Ava DuVernay, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Viola Davis), on television (Insecure, Chewing Gum, Underground), as political leaders (Sen. Kamala Harris, Ilhan Omar), and as students in post-secondary institutions of higher education (Mirza, 2015). As Black women navigate these spaces among racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric, they must continue to perform as strong to survive. As Melissa Harris-Perry suggests in *Sister Citizen* (2011), even in rejecting the spoken

narrative of the strong Black woman by insisting upon self-care, the success and uplift of the aforementioned Black women remain a reflection of the strong Black woman myth, which has become synonymous with worthiness and goodness. However, if they “misbehave” (e.g. experience a bad outcome, make a mistake, show anger, or in any way deviate from the expectations of the mainstream) they are exposed to shaming, particularly by non-Black audiences, and are at risk of losing any privilege they’ve gained and proving true existing stereotypes (Harris-Perry, 2011; Romero, 2000). Even as Black women become more palatable to mainstream audiences, this acceptance is largely dependent upon their upkeep of the “strong Black woman” narrative. And in working towards detangling themselves from identifying or needing to identify as a “strong Black woman,” the socio-political landscape still requires an exertion and performance of that strength in order to achieve success. As Beaubouf-Lafontant (2009) asserts, the myth of the strong Black woman exists to defend and maintain the stratified inequality of by penalizing Black women for expressing human emotions.

*University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)*

As this research utilizes UMBC as its primary setting and as representative of predominantly white institutions, some familiarity with the school is necessary to provide context. According to its mission, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) is dedicated to cultural diversity, social justice, and learning (UMBC). This commitment is seen in the significant effort the university puts forth in supporting and bolstering its international student population, as well as its work to monitor and report progress on its institutionalization of programming focused specifically on cultural diversity. With regard to institutionalized support for diversity-focused scholars and mentoring programs available for graduate students, the Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows Program and PROMISE: Maryland’s Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (PROMISE: AGEF). The Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows Program

supports the advancement of underrepresented minorities in the sciences and those interested in supporting this advancement. PROMISE: AGEP-T is an alliance of schools encompassing the University System of Maryland (USM), community schools, and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Puerto Rico. Led by UMBC, and supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF), PROMISE works to “facilitate underrepresented STEM graduate student and postdoctoral professional development and pathways to careers,” (PROMISE: AGEP, N.d.). All students are able to participate in PROMISE, though they focus on underrepresented minorities. PROMISE offers programs – like Dissertation House, a program designed to provide guidance for students beginning their dissertation process – and opportunities for students to fellowship that are beneficial for students regardless of program. They also offer a significant number of events – like the PROMISE Summer Success Institute – that target students in STEM (PROMISE: AGEP, N.d.).

However, previous research with a limited number of Black women graduate students attending UMBC suggests that they feel isolated on campus, must regularly navigate stereotyping from students and faculty, and are often burdened with speaking as an expert for the race as a whole (Black 2016). Additionally, there seems to be a steady decline of Black woman graduate students, dropping from 212 in the 2009-2010 SY to 151 in 2016-2017, losing nearly 30 percent of the population over six years. Comparatively, White women saw a decline of roughly a third, Black men stayed roughly the same, and White men saw a decrease of about 14 percent over the same time period. Both racial groups saw overall population decreases in the double digits, Blacks seeing a 17 percent decrease (356 to 294) and White students seeing a roughly 25 percent decrease (1,535 to 1,158). Three groups have seen an overall growth from 2009 to 2016: Asians with 8 percent (200 to 216), Hispanic/Latinx with 40 percent (75 to 105), and

International with about 13 percent (507 to 572) (UMBC IRADS, 2017). When compared to the entire graduate student population, Black women graduate students dropped from 7.25 percent to about 6 percent of the population across the eight years of measurement (UMBC IRADS, 2017).

There are a number of plausible explanations for these shifts. First, Maryland has seen steady increases in its Latinx, and Asian populations. From 2000 to 2013, the groups saw 133.6 percent and 67.4 percent increases respectively (Maryland Department of Legislative Services, 2015). Similarly, the White population decreased by over 4 percent in the same time period. However, the Black or African-American population grew by 17.2 percent which functions in opposition of UMBC's trend, suggesting that there may be a disconnect in the experience of Black graduate students. Additionally, if UMBC maintains class or cohort size while also making a conscious effort to recruit and support diverse candidates, then there will be fewer spots available to White students, which could explain the downward trend in White students.

In its mission, UMBC clearly lists its priorities, naming “science, engineering, information technology, human services and public policy” as its focus at the graduate level (UMBC, N.d.). With Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, a black male mathematician and statistician, at the helm of the university as President for nearly 30 years, a purposeful and effective culture of support and excellence developed around marginalized students in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs. Recently, a biochemistry professor highlighted that “faculty expectations changed – and not only faculty but the expectations of white students and even minority students who aren't in our program,” (Chiles, 2017). Though he is specifically discussing the undergraduate Meyerhoff Scholars program, it can be deduced that this cultural shift also positively impacts STEM graduate students from marginalized backgrounds, especially when further bolstered by the Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows program and PROMISE (UMBC –

IMSD, N.d). Nevertheless, though emphasis is placed on STEM, students are also seeking degrees in one of the 20 programs representing non-STEM fields. Unfortunately, there are currently no support programs comparable in funding or reach to that of Meyerhoff. As Collins (2013) suggests in “Learning from the Outsider Within Revisited,” even in the social sciences and humanities, groups that have been marginalized. Specifically, Black women are often excluded from opportunities for inclusion in intellectual discussion and subsequent advancement. As ‘outsiders within,’ Black women have unique perspectives that afford them the ability to develop, critique, and reimagine theories in creative ways. However, faced with micro-aggressions and implicit bias, issues around hyper- and invisibility, silencing, and a lack of mentors with similar experiences in these non-STEM spaces, Black women are often blocked from opportunities to investigate and publish these theories. This exclusion makes it markedly more difficult to obtain academic positions available to those of their white or male counterparts. As Dr. Hrabowski shares in the article,

“You’re not going to show tremendous difference in performance if you don’t have the most powerful people on the campus involved in the work... Diversity offices are very nice and can be supportive, but the power of the academy is in the hands of faculty, the professoriate. It’s only when there is a cultural difference, focusing on everybody from faculty, staff to administration, saying the success of these students from different backgrounds is a top priority on campus, only then can you make a difference” (Chiles, 2017).

Given the difficulties noted by Collins (2013), the steady decrease in Black women graduate students at UMBC, and Dr. Hrabowski’s proven theory on how to make a difference in the performance of diverse students, there is reason to suspect that additional support for Black women and other underrepresented groups outside of STEM is a warranted priority.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted by sociologists and critical race theorists, Black women are situated at the intersection of race and sex, leaving them vulnerable to the combined harms of racism and sexism. Crenshaw (1991) asserts that the Black woman experience is traditionally excluded from the individual discourses on race and gender, i.e. antiracist policy and feminist theory, and without the exploration of this intersectional experience, neither theory can effectively address or work to eradicate Black women's subjugation. Black women stereotypes like the "dominating, emasculating Black woman," Sapphire, perpetually mark Black women as lazy, immoral, and masculine, underserving of help (Bell Scott 1982). This image of masculinity functions as an assumption of strength and independence, which follows an extended history of needing to perform as strong to survive, often results in the exclusion of Black women from interventions and perpetuates the need for this performance, as suggested by Wallace (1978) and Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009). As Harris (2001) asserts, "these suprahuman women have been denied the 'luxuries' of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences, or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, multidimensional characters. They must swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble..., and persist in spite of adversity" (pp. 12).

### *Historical Background*

Enslaved Black women worked inside and outside of the home, working in the fields and caring for both their White enslavers' families and their own. Through policies like Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) which provided aid to men and their families, the welfare state was restrictive in its support for racial minorities and women and viewed it as an unnecessary expense to the privileged (Shram, Soss, and Fording 2014). Following the civil rights and women's rights movements, there was a sharp increase of neoliberal paternalism, as

deindustrialization emerged and the rights afforded to racial minorities and women could lead to higher wages and greater access to welfare, which in turn leads to higher tax rates and costs for corporations. Additionally, the guarantee of certain rights – like fair employment, voting rights, fair housing – combined with the antipoverty policies of the welfare state, increased the life chances, and thus likelihood of social mobility for both women and racial minorities while threatening the status of the white, social elite. Policies like the War on Poverty, the War on Crime, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, led to work requirements for able-bodied people (largely single-mothers, which were disproportionately Black) on welfare, and minimum required sentences for drug offences, which largely led to the arrest of Black males (Massey and Denton 1993; Shram et. al., 2014). These laws forced Black women to be breadwinners and lead households in a way that is not the trend for White women (Caplan-Bricker, 2017). Concerted efforts by corporations and the power elite to coordinate with mass media, the Republican party, and Southern democrats solidified the racist, sexist, and classist sentiments that were ever-present in the American ideology by widely distributing and reinforcing a stereotype of poverty and the impoverished that hyper-focused on individualistic aspects and effectively discounted the structural components (Shram et. al 2014). Their utilization of mass media, education, government, and finance to solidify these stereotypes are why Black women – who’s domestic service allowed White women to make gains in gender equality – continue to be excluded from opportunities and required to work harder for less.

Today, Black women vote at a higher rate than all other groups, but are underrepresented at every level of government. Over sixty percent of Black women are in the workforce, and over 80 percent of those in the workforce are breadwinners for the home, but Black women have one of the highest likelihoods of living in poverty. Twenty-eight percent of domestic workers are

Black women, which contributes to their likelihood of living in poverty, and comes full circle to show the impact of slavery and the effectiveness of the paternalistic, antiracist policies described above in maintaining this status quo and in many ways requiring Black women to be strong to survive (DuMonthier, Childers, and Milli, 2017).

### *Theoretical Background*

The Combahee River Collective's Black Feminist Statement (1974) outlines Black feminism as a theoretical framework in detail. Informed by the work of a variety of Black women activists, including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, Black feminism originates from "the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy." The Collective asserts that Black feminists recognize the intersections of race, sex, class, and sexuality, and feel solidarity with progressive Black men, though they recognize that they struggle with them against racism, and against them with regard to sexism.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), builds on this understanding, describing Black woman as traditionally excluded from the individual discourses on race and gender described above. She argued that without the exploration of this intersectional experience, neither theory can effectively address or work to eradicate Black women's subjugation. The emergent theory of this work, intersectionality, acknowledges that Black women exist at a unique societal juncture that results in being "doubly" and "triply" oppressed, due to prevalent racism and sexism. The magnitude of oppression continues to grow as other identities – like class, sexual orientation, ability, and religion are introduced.

Persistent stereotypes like the “strong black woman,” and the angry black woman, make it difficult for Black women to gain access to help and resources. Beauboeuf (2009) explored the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype through interviews with 58 Black women, finding that the performance of this myth not only damages its actors physically and emotionally, but is used to distract from aspects of structural racism and patriarchy. Her research provides further evidence for the notion that society makes Black women believe that they must be available to everyone at all times, solving problems and racking up accomplishments “without scarring.”

### *Black Women in Education*

Black women have made significant gains in educational achievement over the last 30 years, with their continual gains culminating in higher achievement than their male counterparts (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). These gains fueled the narrative that Black women are less oppressed than Black men, which was bolstered in 2016 when research emerged to indicate that Black women had the highest percentage of college enrollment of any group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This fact quickly shifted to be a false and popular narrative of Black women being the most educated group, perpetuating the stereotype of the “strong, independent Black woman” (Bronner Helm, 2016; Parker, 2016; Neff, 2016). Following historical trends, this characterization resulted in the unique educational experiences of Black women being ignored or misrepresented (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). However, enrollment is not credential attainment or graduation. Data indicates that Black women have a higher share of degrees, across sex, when compared to other races. According to 2012-2013 data, 65 percent of Black people with bachelor’s degrees are women, compared to 60 percent of Latinx, 60 percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives, 56 percent of Whites, and 56 percent of Asians. That equates to roughly 124 thousand Black women, 112 thousand Latina women, 11 thousand American Indian/Alaska Native women, 672 thousand white women, and roughly 72.8 thousand Asian women. Thus, out

of the 987.4 thousand women with a bachelor degree in the United States, about 12.6 percent are Black women, 11.3 percent are Latina, 0.6 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native, 68 percent are White women, and 7.3 percent are Asian (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Ergo, White women are overwhelming the most educated women's group.

Further, Bartman (2015) argues that African American women have increasing graduation rates, but that they are not keeping pace with White, Latina, and Asian-American women. She further submits that some of the issues contributing to this lower graduation rate is a result of African American women's intersectionality, as well as a lack of Black faculty and peers on campus.

#### *Black Women in Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education*

As a result of their traditional dearth of Black faculty and students on campus, the lived experience of Black women at PWIs is often characterized as a hostile environment. The aforementioned performance is necessary in hostile environments like predominantly white institutions of higher education. Existing research exploring diversity and campus climate at predominately white institutions suggest that Black women, even when academically successful, must navigate visibility (both invisibility and hypervisibility) which negatively impacts social connectedness (Domingue, 2014; Hurtado, 2014; Shavers and Moore, 2014; Haynes, 2011; Davis, et.al, 2004; Justin-Johnson, 2004; Chavous, 2000). This theory is further supported by Laird, et.al (2007), who found that African American students at PWIs are less engaged than their counterparts attending historically Black colleges and university (HBCUs).

Davis, et. al (2004) found five major themes that characterize the undergraduate experience of successful Black women students at a predominantly white, southeastern university: (1) Unfairness/Sabotage and Condescension; (2) Isolation & Connection; (3) They

Seem the Same; I'm the one who's different; (4) I have to prove I'm worthy to be here; and (5) Invisibility and Supervisibility. They succinctly summarized their research participants' experiences, stating:

Unfairness, sabotage, and condescension are everyday occurrences in the white world in which I live at the university. In order to connect with students, faculty, administrators, and others on and around campus, I must be the one to initiate interaction, and I must also prove I am worthy as a student or friend. I am continuously made aware of how different I am, especially when I am the only black student in a class. Life is full of opposites: I feel as if I am seen as the same as other blacks by many white, yet I often feel different from other black students. Perhaps the most common experience I have is one of extremes: Either I am invisible, or I am its opposite – I am supervisible (pp. 436).

The idea of navigating invisibility and supervisibility (or hypervisibility) is also reflected in the work of Shavers and Moore (2014). Utilizing a Black feminist thought framework, they discovered similar themes in their analysis of self-presentation strategies among fifteen African-American woman doctoral students attending a predominantly white institution. Five key categories emerged in their analysis, specifically the academic mask; the private self; the otherselves; protection of self; and disadvantages of the academic mask, which indicated that students regularly shifted their presentations of self to ensure they were perceived as worthy and professional in response to the oppression faced in school and professional settings, while feeling more comfortable to be their “normal” selves amongst family and friends. This idea of Black people maintaining multiple identities for self-preservation in oppressive environments was first described as “double consciousness,” a theory developed by W.E.B Du Bois (1903) over a century ago. Haynes's (2011) work further builds on this idea of multiple masks, highlighting that African-American women attending predominantly white institutions are hypervisible, as demonstrated by overachievement and behavior management. The literature is sparse in exploring how Black women are able to academically achieve and persist in these environments.

### *Methods of Support*

A method of support that has been repeatedly highlighted for Black women students, is mentorship. In the article “Issues and Strategies,” Bartman (2015) recommends that African American women involve themselves in cross-cultural mentoring and Black sororities to build relations with faculty and peers on campus. However, her recommendation of cross-cultural mentoring, is at odds with research conducted by Patton and Harper (2003), who advise same-race mentorship experiences. Their research determined five main themes as relates to graduate level women and mentorship in predominantly white institutions. Specifically, (1) African American female mentors help to create a rich, unique experience that has a deeper meaningful connection than traditional mentorship concepts. (2) There is a void of African American faculty on campus, which makes it particularly difficult to initiate and build a program. Additionally, there is (3) a cultural difference in the expectations of a mentor-mentee relationship among African-American women. The graduate students indicated that they are looking for someone with a shared experience, that is nurturing and can provide “culturally relevant counsel.” They also indicate that they do not trust White men and women. (4) Graduate students have navigated the lack of African American faculty, and instead support each other with peer-mentoring, even across programs. Finally, (5) all of the participants indicated that they are committed to giving back and acting as that mentor for other women of color. Patton (2009) deepened her exploration of mentorship by focusing on the mentorship experiences of eight African-American women in graduate and professional schools, paying close attention to (1) how participants defined mentoring, (2) participants’ perspectives on their current mentorship relationships, and (3) the significance and availability of African-American women as mentors. Overall, participants found significant value in African American female mentors, and if they did not have them, felt that

said mentors could make a difference in their lived experiences. As a result, Patton suggested paired mentorship should exist between African American faculty/staff and graduate students.

Grant and Simmons (2008) also found that African-American doctoral students at predominantly white institutions need more than the traditional mentoring components. There is a very specific need for a more hands-on nurturing, “othermother” relationship and experience with the mentor.

### *Research Aims*

The voices of 18 participating Black women graduate students, roughly ten percent of their population at UMBC, are leading this work. Each research aim is a piece of the framing for their story. The first research aim, *to understand campus climate from the perspective of Black women graduate students*, speaks to their experience. The second – *to assess the impact these perceptions and experiences have, if any, on academic achievement, social connectedness, and professional development* – considers the impact of their experience on academic, social, and professional outcomes. Finally, the third aim – *to examine whether there is support for the theory that Black women need additional, unique interventions to be better prepared to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and professionally in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education, like UMBC* – focuses on meaning and resolution. Specifically, this means defining what the experiences and outcomes suggest Black women need to thrive, whether those needs are being met, and how they start or continue to be met moving forward.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The research took place March 2017 – May 2017, and included: continued development of a literature review; interviewing; surveying; discourse analysis; reporting of findings; and conclusions. The project was approved by the IRB of University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

This study seeks to understand the experience of Black women at UMBC. Notably there is a dearth of research on the experiences of Black women at PWIs, and thus this research is most timely. In particular, the specific aim of this research is understanding in detail how Black women graduate students perceive, process, and assign meaning to their experiences at UMBC. To best represent their experiences, I utilized qualitative data, specifically open-ended survey responses and in-depth interviews.

As my overall research goals are to explore Black women student experiences across multiple predominantly white institutions, and this project represents one school (UMBC), it can also be defined as a single case study (Richards and Morse 2013, Roulston 2010). In keeping with the case study approach, the goal is not to make a generalization of all Black women graduate students, but instead provide additional insight into their unique experiences at UMBC and begin to determine whether there is any commonality in experience across predominantly white institutions.

I initially distributed a survey instrument with closed-ended and open-ended response options (Appendix B). This data was supplemented by in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, following an interview guide available in Appendix A. For this work, only the qualitative data were analyzed and reported, with the intent to further explore the quantitative data at a later date.

### *Theories, format, approach*

Interviews were phenomenological in nature, taking a neo-positivist approach, utilizing a Black feminist framework. As put forth by Roulston (2010), a phenomenological interview style generates detailed information on participant experiences and requires the identification of participants that have not only experienced the phenomena, but can explain it. The neo-positivist conception, also presented by Roulston (2010), is said to produce valid and quality findings, as the researcher takes an objective, or neutral, role in the interview, only asking questions. Due to the proximity of my identity and experiences to the participants, I took this approach to minimize bias and reduce personal influence. The neo-positivist conception also holds that the data generated is valid and credible because the interviewee is responding as their “authentic self.” However, as highlighted by Shavers and Moore (2014), Black women employ a number of different aspects of self, based on their surroundings and the desired perception. While a rapport seemed to be established there is no way to be sure whether answers given were representative of the respondents’ “authentic self” (Roulston, 2010).

Through the entirety of this project I utilized a Black feminist thought (BFT), as defined by Collins (2002), as the interpretive framework for this study. The key characteristics of BFT, are: (1) that it is shaped by the lived experiences of Black women; (2) in the midst of their unique, personal experiences, Black women still have some shared experiences; (3) that additional identities – like class, sexual orientation, and age – compound the Black women experience, resulting in a variety of contexts for understanding. A precedent for the use of BFT in qualitative research is seen in the study of Black women doctoral students conducted by Shavers and Moore (2014), in which BFT is similarly employed.

### *Setting*

The setting of data collection varied, dependent upon where participants felt most comfortable. Interviews took place in different areas, including a reserved library study room under the investigators name, with “study” as reason, coffee shops, and over the phone. Participants were repeatedly asked to confirm their comfortability with the open-to-the-public spaces and reminded of the nature of the questions. Each interviewee agreed that they preferred their respective areas. It should be noted that no visible or verbal cues indicating discomfort were observed in relation to the occasional passerby.

### *Sample*

In order for my research to be considered valid, it was imperative that I employ a criterion-based, purposeful sampling method. To most fully understand the experiences of Black women graduate students, particularly with my adaption of a Black feminist framework, the participants must self-identify as Black women graduate students at UMBC.

### *Participants*

All participants self-identified as Black graduate student women currently pursuing degrees at UMBC. Here, Black refers to any nationality or cultural identity within the African Diaspora. As roughly 23 percent of UMBC’s graduate student population has international student status, respondents were asked to indicate whether they identified as an international student, as well as their region. Respondents represented both full and part-time students. Recruitment efforts were two-fold: I initially sent recruitment materials (e.g., email, flyers, etc.) to all professors and administrators of graduate programs at UMBC (Appendix C), and asked them to share it with their students; and, I utilized snowball sampling method, which calls for the identification of one participant that meets the criteria and utilizing their connections to find another (Richards and Morse 2013).

### *Personal Bias*

Vital to the validity of phenomenological research is an acknowledgement of personal biases (Roberts and Morse 2013). In my identity as a Black woman graduate student at UMBC, it is likely that I have shared experiences with the participants (Collins 2000). In an effort to remain as objective as possible during the interviews, I followed the procedures for a neo-positivist approach, utilizing the process discussed by Roulston (2010), as is further detailed in the section below. My status as a current graduate student also allowed me greater access to the university and resources useful for recruitment, including personal connections (for snowball sampling) and contact information for all department heads.

### *Data Collection and Management*

#### Survey

The survey was distributed online using Quatrains survey software, accessed through UMBC. It utilized a combination of open and close-ended, and rating questions. The survey remained open for 2-3 weeks, from March 31 to April 14, 2017, and ran concurrently with interviews. The survey was divided into five sections: demographic information; academic achievement; campus climate; professional development (via mentorship); and social connectedness, to align with the second research aim. All collected data was saved to the investigator's password protected personal computer for analysis. The oral consent form was provided at the beginning of the survey, with the option to either leave the survey (if do not consent) or choose next and continue with the survey, which provided consent. Survey questions for this project were developed by the primary investigator, with some adapted from previous, unpublished work (both survey and interviews) on similar topics (Black 2015, 2016). The resulting qualitative data was analyzed using Qualtrics analytic software and MAXQDA, a mixed method analysis and coding software. The Qualtrics software was used for data

preparation Qualitative data gathered from the survey, specifically the data detailing instances of discrimination and explaining UMBC race relations, was reviewed and analyzed in MAXQDA. Qualitative survey data was reviewed in conjunction with interview data for greater in-depth analysis.

Incentives in the form of four \$10 Starbucks gift cards were offered as part of a raffle for participants. Respondents were given the option to be included in the drawing by providing their UMBC email address before concluding the survey. It was emphasized that the participation in the drawing was voluntary both in the consent procedure before the survey began and at the end of the survey, as part of the question. To maintain the confidentiality of survey respondents that shared their emails, were de-identified by removing the associated email addresses to a separate spreadsheet, stored on the investigator's password protected personal computer. Winners were chosen randomly using the Excel random number generator.

### Interviews

Five phenomenological, semi-structured interviews, between ten and sixty minutes in length, were conducted over two weeks. Interviews were held both in-person and over the phone, to accommodate working students. Three in-person interviews were held in mutually agreed upon settings and recorded using the voice memo function on the investigator's password protected iPhone 6S and transferred to the investigator's password protected personal computer for analysis. Two phone interviews were held using a newly created *freeconferencecall.com* line, with each interview recording using the functionalities provided by that service. Upon completion of the interviews, the recordings were downloaded to the investigator's personal computer for analysis, and the *freeconferencecall.com* account was deleted. Only the investigator had access to either device.

The computer-based software, MAXQDA, was used for transcription and analysis. The interviews were of low risk to participants. As described in the IRB approved oral consent script, experiencing there was some emotional and professional risk, as respondents shared personal experiences and stories that may be recognizable by involved parties, due to UMBC's small Black woman graduate student population (Appendix D). To mitigate this risk, all personal identifiers were excluded and participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses. Further, students were assured that their participation was voluntary. No participants asked to end the interview in advance of completion. First name pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality of participants. Due to the small sample size, no additional characteristics will be used.

#### Consent

My study focuses on a specific demographic of UMBC students – Black women graduate students – which are small in number. Interview and survey questions will ask that students share their experiences at UMBC, and may include detailing instances of racism and/or sexism from other students/peers, professors, staff, etc. Associating this information with specific Black women graduate students could result in legal, social, or physical harm if participants are identified. In the absence of written, signed consent, an oral script was read and consent was given before recording. A hard copy of the oral script was provided for participants' records. For the online survey, a written explanation of the research was shared in advance of the survey, and respondents indicated their consent by choosing next and continuing with the survey. If respondents did not select "next" and instead exited the browser or selected "exit survey", they could not continue with the survey. This consent was recorded and saved with the rest of their responses. To avoid coercion/undue influence, participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary and they can choose to end the interview at any time. Additionally, the

interviewer also employed a neo-positive approach, by taking a neutral stance and refraining from sharing their personal experiences. Additionally, there was a consent log, with the assigned identifier (participant # - where # represents the interview number) and an indication of whether or not consent was given. Additionally, as there was an honorarium in the form of \$5 Starbucks gift cards for interview participants, they provided their initials (next to their participant #) as proof that they received the gift card. Due to some participants' inability to meet in person, some Starbucks gift cards were purchased and delivered electronically, and thus could not write the initials signifying receipt of gift cards. Instead, receipts with their email address redacted can be used as proof of receipt.

The next section details the qualitative data gathered from interviews and open-ended survey results.

## FINDINGS

### *Research Aim 1: The Experience*

#### Race Relations

The short-answer explanations of campus climate ratings suggest that most of the respondents either personally experienced or knew of a negative, race-based encounter on campus. In their responses, students cite discrimination, microaggressions, spoken and written racial slurs, instances of Blackface, and swastikas drawn in public spaces as examples of these interactions. As defined by Sue, et.al (2007), microaggressions are “brief commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (pp.273).

As one Jordan (survey respondent) shared,

“Within the 2 years that I've been here, there have been racist events that have happened, such as Blackface, and swastikas signs, but the university does not directly address these issues. There's no programs on race at the graduate level, except for STEM.”

She cited multiple explicitly racist incidents, a lack of discussion around these incidents, and an institutional lack in non-STEM focused spaces for support, but still rated race relations as average.<sup>1</sup> Another student highlighted instances of discrimination, but still defined race relations as “good.”

**“Race relations are definitely above other campuses I have been to, but there are still issue[s] such as writing and postings on the wall and random, rude, discriminatory encounters.”** (Amber, survey respondent)

Jasmine explained that she scored relations as good because, “It is much better than my undergraduate experience.”

These three responses suggest that the perception of race relations on campus is a factor of respondents’ expectations and past experiences as opposed to the likelihood of discriminatory and racist experiences on campus. The responses are comparative, rather than strictly based on UMBC’s campus climate. A lived experience of racism and sexism is constant for Black women, so microaggressions, discrimination, and other prejudicial interactions become a normalized part of life. Thus, “good” on-campus race relations may more accurately be defined as “better than” other on-campus experiences.

Daria (survey respondent) demonstrates this point in her explanation of her rating of good:

“I honestly, **don't spend much time outside of my workspace**. However, when I do I am in the Commons or UC. I've never felt unsafe or have experienced or witnessed anything racist. People from **different cultures seem to share the space nicely**...In terms of **my** program within UMBC, I'd describe the race relations as average, not terrible, but not good either. **I've heard racial slurs and have experienced microaggressions several times within my program.**”

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<sup>1</sup> See UMBC subsection for additional information.

She shares that she does not spend much time outside of her work area, which one assumes is connected to her program of study. If true, that implies that she spends most of her time engaging in her program, the race relations of which she defines as “average” due to racial slurs and microaggressions. However, she rates the campus as “good” overall because in the time (albeit short) that she’s outside of her program, she does not notice or experience anything particularly racist. In her case, she is comparing the race relations of UMBC overall to that of her program, and holding the program as separate from UMBC. This highlights our societal tendency to focus on interpersonal interactions and attribute those interactions to be the fault of the individual, without consideration of the institutionalized structures that contribute to their actions and beliefs. It also puts forth the idea that diverse cultures sharing a space without major incident is an indication of positive race relations, as opposed to adherence to social norms around behavior.

A different student suggested the same in her explanation,

“I would not deem it excellent due to the fact that **there are instances of discrimination/microaggressions** present on campus. However, I would deem it good because I generally find that **people of different races get along relatively well.**”  
(Elizabeth, survey respondent)

In contrast, two students provided their perspective on the impact of institutional structures on race relations:

“**Though UMBC is touted as a diverse campus, it is still a PWI.** As a graduate student I feel as if I'm isolated from race relations on campus, but via conversations with some undergraduate students as well as my personal classroom experiences in my program, I get the impression that **diversity at UMBC is all in a name. Faculty and staff members are still mostly white.** This has **significant implications for race relations on UMBC's campus** even if there are programs and supports for students of color” (Madeline, survey respondent).

“I chose this answer [good] because I think that the **efforts for inclusion via programs** like the Bridge to the Doctorate, the Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows Program, and **PROMISE all provide resources for inclusion and community at UMBC**” (Ada), survey respondent.

Though referencing different experiences, both responses suggest that UMBC's institutional priorities are perceived based on the nature of the resources the university provides, like professors and support groups. Further, these priorities shape the perspectives and overall on-campus experience of Black women graduate students. For example, students notice a lack of representation in the professoriate, and it impacts their perceptions:

“..for a young university, I would expect it to be more diverse...and **it should be more women...people of color on the tenure track - it's not enough**. So, no, it's not diverse enough. and that goes into the black women on campus feeling like oh, **there's probably like 10 black students to one black faculty member** and it's like no...no. So, no...it's not diverse enough. they need to do more. I love being surrounded, like, by blackness. like, like, by black excellence. when you see like two [Black] women faculty walking together, it's like [excited, dreamy exclamation] 'oohhhhh'... so it's like I want to see a group of y'all walking together - not 2 or 3 but a group! So yeah, **that definitely impacts my perceptions**. It makes me more critical” (Kayla, interviewee).

Based on their open answer responses, Black women graduate students at UMBC navigate microaggressions and other racist incidents regularly on-campus. However, due to these incidents' frequent and consistent occurrence in their everyday lives off-campus, they have somewhat normalized the experience. Instead of finding any instance of racism or discrimination as cause for even mild alarm, it seems that for most, outcry has been reserved for extreme cases. Frankie surmises this idea in her response: “On average, most people operate within a racist system of thinking, working, and socializing. UMBC is average in that regard.”

Black women students' reflection on experiences with discrimination highlighted being advised against participation in opportunities; having their experiences and contributions silenced, questioned and dismissed; being purposefully avoided by students and faculty members; and receiving lower grades at the mention of race. One instance of differential treatment was shared by Tracy, who was advised against applying for a particular clinical practicum site by her training director because “they do not accept second year students.” She

later found out from a white male student that many students in their second year, including him, worked at the site. Upon bringing this information to her director's attention, she was told her chances of acceptance were slim and again advised against applying. Tracy took the advice and did not apply, but later discovered that another white male second year was encouraged to apply by the same professor that discouraged her.

“The **only difference between us was our race and gender**. We had taken all the same classes, neither had clinical experience, and I'm sure our grades were similar (and if not, mine were better, because I had nearly a 4.0). I actually had more undergraduate coursework related to the work I'd do at the site than the white male student in my cohort...I very strongly feel that the faculty member/training director did not want me to be competition for his student (the white male in my cohort) and this is why I was told lies to prevent me from applying to the site. **I really felt that it was a combination of my race, gender, and the fact that I was not a student of this faculty member**, that made him put the white male's interest above my own” (Tracy, survey respondent).

She goes on to highlight that other Black students were also differentially treated, having to petition for help with practicum applications, where “no other students in [her] cohort (or program)...had problems with...not being supported during the application process.” Though not typically as explicitly damaging to professional development as Tracy's story, the majority of participants that shared their encounters with discrimination cited classroom experiences as examples, with some acknowledging that they aren't sure if it's a result of their race or gender.

Madeline (survey respondent) shared,

“In a general sense, I've often felt in classroom situations **my knowledge and personal experiences** have been **dismissed or overlooked** by classmates, in particular white males. **I'm never sure if that's because I'm black, a woman, or both.**”

Interview participants reported similar occurrences, defining them as “not so much direct discrimination, but those subtleties.” Kayla shared that “it's not like anyone saying to you, ‘you black...!’ It's like ‘are you sure about that?’ ‘Where'd you get that information from?’” Being

unnecessarily questioned was also consistent with other interviews of Black women graduate students at UMBC:

“I’ve experienced where it feels like..um..when you’re interacting with faculty, that...they’re looking up ways to **sure up** what other people are saying. But, when they’re talking to...uh...the people that I’ve noticed are not minority women students, they’re looking for ways to sure up what they are saying; so... they’re not looking for gaps, you’re addressing just that last little piece... it’s like they’re filling in...like the rest of the picture... I feel like, and do notice that, when [she is] talking about addressing things, it’s like, a **dismantling** of... “well yeah, but..” it’s a **notice of gaps with no constructive**, like, suring up that goes in other places. So, I’m aware of that” (Jennifer, interviewee). (Black, 2016).

Participants also highlighted being censored and receiving backlash for pointing out racism, even when it may be relevant to the conversation:

“Other students, and sometimes faculty, make **racist comments** when explaining research or lecture points. When **I acknowledge the remarks and correct them**, I am **ostracized** and students stop speaking to me. “One professor in my department is **especially bigoted** (racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic). He gave me **lower grades on assignments when I specified things based on race.**” (Frankie, survey respondent)

“So it’s this white woman, and for example, we were talking about race and stuff like that, so I said that like, ‘It feels as though the school system is racist.’ And she was like ‘Oh, what makes you say that?’...and I was like, ‘You can look at the funding - schools of color tend to get funded less, um, their like infrastructure tends to be worse than predominantly white schools...look at the outcomes, it looks racist.’ And she was like, ‘**Oh you can’t say racist**’.... ‘**Oh, you can’t use the word racist**’ and I was like ‘Why?’.. “**Because people are gonna get turned off.**’ Who these people are? I don’t know. So then, we’re having this conversation, and she uses the word racist...and I’m like **how can you try to censor my speech, but then you’re using the same word you just told me not to, right?**” (Kayla, interviewee)

Further, students both in this and previous studies spoke specifically about working in groups with their peers:

“One particular experience involved the need for group work to be completed among 5 students broken into one group of 3 and one group of 2. I was assigned to the group of two with **another male student who was very adamant that he refused to participate in the group work with me.** He eventually found one of the other males in the group of 3 to switch with him as my partner. Being the only woman participant in this activity as

well as the only person of color in this group, I felt **discriminated** against” (Ada, survey respondent).

“If I’m in a group with...being the minority student, it’s this **sense of exclusion**...there’s certain behavioral traits that you see automatically. Either **diminishes your value, silences your voice** in that ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about,’ we’re going to go this way. And it’s a group think kind of mentality,” (Charlene, interviewee) (Black, 2016).

Some students, however, shared that their classroom experiences were positive:

“I’d say **overall...I feel like I’m heard in the classroom**...I haven’t had anyone openly disregard what I’m saying or like, you know, try to cut me off or anything... without saying excuse me” (Kayla, interviewee).

“...**incredibly positive because the basis of my course work kind of has to do with inclusion and diversity**, um, so which is completely different than experiences I’ve had at any other institution or program” (Rachel, interviewee)

“...Peer to peer, **I’ve called out privilege before, and they’ve acknowledged it**... they acknowledge it and **apologize and move forward**. Every time I call out privilege, they say like... ‘I never saw it like that before, thank you for bringing it to my attention’” (Christine, interviewee).

### Encouragement

Exploration of campus climate, particularly as relates to the experience of Black women graduate students, must investigate support systems. The literature suggests that communities of support help Black women to persist (Bartman, 2015; Patton, 2009; Patton and Harper, 2003).

From respondents’ descriptions of encouragement received on campus, two types of encouragement emerged: (1) reminders that they are capable and doing well, and (2) providing some sort of assistance or service. Due to the internalized idea of ‘strong Black womanhood,’ Black women often feel as though they can and must achieve without any expectation of help (Beauboeuf, 2009). In *Overcoming the Odds* (1995), a book that explores the educational experiences of Black women participants and alumnae of the Meyerhoff Scholars program at UMBC, the students highlight that their parents reinforced the “strong Black woman” narrative,

telling them that “nobody’s going to give you anything... You are going to have to work extra hard, not only to do well, but to fight against people’s prejudices or preconceived notions about you based on your race or gender.” Another scholar shared that her mother told her “It’s going to be harder so you have to watch how you behave. Watch what you do and how you act. You have to work harder for it.” Thus, the receipt of encouragement and services provide a relief – both acknowledgement that your work is paying off and assistance in moving to the next step.

One student explains her experience with encouragement similarly, sharing that:

“Throughout my graduate experience, **many students, faculty, and administrators have expressed words of encouragement** (e.g., "you are doing well" and "you will be able to achieve this milestone"), especially during difficult times. They have also been **very open to listening and giving me advice**. This has helped me to problem solve challenging situations” (Janet, survey respondent).

Consistent with reminders of capabilities and offering or provision of services, this student shares how she’s been encouraged at UMBC:

“**My advisor, several other members of my faculty, as well as students in my program are very supportive**. They **share resources** to help me reach my academic and career goals, and they **encourage me** when I need support, by saying kind words and **offering their help**” (Tracy, survey respondent).

Three women, Jasmine, Georgia, and Frankie, also characterized encouragement through their survey responses. Jasmine, highlights encouragement as her professors’ high expectations: “I have had several professors say that they are looking forward to seeing me succeed in their class as a black female STEM student.” Georgia’s response seems to describe reassurance in the face of imposter syndrome: “Both my professors and staff affiliated with my fellowship program continually encourage me when I express anxieties about class/assignment performance.” Lastly, Frankie is encouraged by faculty and staff that are willing to do the intellectual and personal work to be mindful of race and racism’s impact on situations. She also highlights a group of

students that “is comprised mostly of Black women, but two are men and four are women who do not identify as Black.”

The above instances of encouragement provide a more positive view of the UMBC experience that supports Black women graduate students in their pursuits and provides a sense of community that may facilitate a feeling of belonging that supports their persistence and success.

### *Research Aim 2: Impact*

The second research aim explores how the on-campus experiences cited above impact Black women graduate students’ success, as outlined by their professional development and social connectedness. Review of the open answer survey results, as well as the interview transcripts led to three main themes: Visibility, Community, and Belonging.

#### Visibility

All interview respondents indicated that they navigate the extremities of visibility – both invisibility and hypervisibility – on campus. One interview participant, Kayla, describes an example of hypervisibility, experienced during at a recent talk hosted by UMBC President, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski:

“So this week we went to the president’s talk or whatever, when he was having the lunch or whatever. It was cool. But, so like we were sitting there... and it was like my friend was like “why is...**why is this white man staring at us?**...we go here, **we belong here.**” And so like **getting those glances**... is kind of like...when some looks at you like... and you’re like “what’s up, what’s the problem?” So like, **those feelings of recognizing your identity because like someone else is like looking at you?** I’d say that happens at UMBC, right...so **it wasn’t only him.. it was another white woman there.** and it’s like, no, we don’t want nothin’. Like, you know...so stuff like that, it’s kind of like...yeah.”  
(Kayla)

This group was not only seen, but made to feel like they stick out. They felt that the status they were prioritizing – student – was superseded by external players, who marked their master status as Black women. This positioning was not verbally communicated, but felt and understood,

perhaps unbeknownst to the white man and woman implicated. The students were made to feel as though they did not belong, as implied in the above affirmation, “we go here, we belong here.”

In another instance, a student is hypervisible as the only Black woman, and sometimes person, in many of her courses. Below, she expresses that she felt “glad” that a faculty member acknowledged her and offered additional help, as opposed to just pointing her out as “Black” in comparison to non-Black peers.

“As far as at UMBC, I feel like **being the only Black female** in the classes...like, um, I had one professor point me out, but not in a way like ‘you’re Black’, but like ‘**I’m here if you need anything, I’m here to support you.**’ So **I’m glad about that** because in undergrad, that was unheard of.” (Taylor, interviewee)

She suggests the latter was commonplace in her undergraduate program. This experience illustrates an important point: Black women often find themselves in spaces in which they are conspicuous – whether due to race, gender, the combination, or other facets of identity. But, rarely are they acknowledged past that ascribed status. This student’s described experience became positive when her humanity and experience were recognized, with action attributed to correct the inequality or difference in experience. As suggested by her response, instead of projecting either the assumption of strength or inadequacy, or expectation of additional labor from her, this professor observed how her position in the classroom could impact her. With these considerations, one could draw the conclusion that like most, Black women graduate students want to be seen. But, they want to be seen holistically and offered the space for them to stop performing and remove the masks of strength and self-preservation that they are accustomed to carrying. Kayla emphasizes this point in her interview, highlighting a similar, positive, experience in which a professor recognizes the nuances of Black womanhood:

“[my mentor is] like... ‘I know as a black woman you feel like you always have to be at top and at it, but let me know if you need more time.’ So, even though she’s not a black woman, **she knows experiences of black women**, so she’s really frank about that.”

Unfortunately, this freedom is often short-lived. Taylor was also singled out by a professor for advice in managing a race-related issue with his child. She expressed mixed emotions about it:

“It was interesting that he asked me like “what do I do?” And I was like, I don’t know why you’re asking me. Yeah, but yeah, **I was in a weird way appreciative that he recognized that** [the similarities between the student and his daughter], but. yeah.”  
(Taylor, interviewee)

This assumption of availability and willingness to perform free labor is a function of the subservient role that Black women have been forced to play throughout most of history. Notated by “I was in a weird way appreciative that he recognized that,” there is an appreciation of being held in high enough esteem, as a Black woman, to potentially help. By asking for her help, the professor indicates that he understands that she and his daughter share a unique experience, and that she is capable of not only understanding but providing guidance. The presumptions that (1) she knows how to most appropriately explain this in relation to his child; and (2) she would take the time to teach him if she does, are examples of how stereotypes and hypervisibility intersect. On one hand, Black women graduate students want their presence and unique experiences acknowledged. However, they do not want to be expected to teach others how to manage, process, or solve problems they are facing that deal with race or gender. As an interviewee shared in earlier research:

“I always say my goal isn’t to change other people’s minds. I’m **not interested in changing other people’s minds** in terms of race, in terms of sexism, in terms of xenophobia...” (Charlene) (Black, 2016).

As demonstrated above, Black women graduate students often face the burden of teaching peers and professors the nuances of race and gender, a result of both internal and

external pressures. This consistent recalling of said experiences, while simultaneously fighting against subjugation, can have negative impacts on mental health and is deeply rooted in the “strong Black woman” narrative. If they choose to educate on their own terms - without being asked, then they often face negative consequences like chastisement and being reduced to the sapphire caricature of the angry Black woman, which also negatively impacts their mental health. Jane, one of the interview participants, shares her typical classroom experience:

“Honestly, **my classroom experiences is triggering** walking into the classroom, because I’m just like, I need to stick up and I need to stand up and correct these things because if not, it will continue. But then if you constantly are being shut down or people are pushing back or just saying stupid stuff, because that what it is, then I get tired and I just sit there and don’t say anything.”

Black women that engage in such work are often silenced by being shifted from hypervisibility to invisibility. In graduate school, this shift can result in a lower grade or a loss of resources, specifically relationships that may be key to additional opportunities and which may explain Black women graduate students manage their behavior. Jane further illustrates how perceptions of her shifted when she decided to more boldly discuss issues she found important:

“...I came into the program trying to be more tokenish because I didn’t want to deal with the like drama of like...oh I gotta, I gotta let you know that you’ve got the wrong...actually, you got the right one. I tried to be that way, but then too much was just happening. I do feel like when I raise certain issues, when I bring certain things up, because it jolts their own personal experiences that people are like ‘oh...’... **like now I’m seen as this angry black woman**, or like **overbearing** and I’m like I’m just trying to tell you the truth and I care so much that I feel like it would be disingenuous for me to like let stuff go.”

She goes on to describe the emotional toll of choosing to step out of tokenism and discuss the impact of race on education as a Black woman in a hostile environment:

“...Here I am, at the graduate school level and I want to be a changemaker and the folks who are supposed to be facilitating this stuff...they don’t, they don’t wanna hear it.”

As shared in an earlier quote, another student highlighted that when she discussed issues of race, she was ostracized by their peers and received lower grades.

As indicated in the preceding stories, invisibility is characterized by exclusion from opportunities, the necessity to initiate relationships, the silencing of experiences, and purposeful avoidance. It creates a barrier to resources and information that most would argue students need to successfully complete a graduate degree. For example, research, publishing, and clinical practicums are examples of activities completed at the graduate level for professional development and to gain notoriety in one's field of choice so as to be more marketable in what, in many cases, is an oversaturated market. Faculty and other university staff often act as gatekeepers to these opportunities, and building relationships with them are key to gaining access. Thus, being invisible to faculty members – which can also mean being relegated to a position below another student with whom they more easily connect – can be a major deterrence to professional growth. As discussed previously Tracy was discouraged from applying to a clinical practicum by a professor while he consistently encouraged white males with (observed) parallel levels of experience and academic prowess to apply. She indicated that she had nearly a 4.0 GPA and related experiences and classwork, but she was still deterred. Though, based on responses, such an explicit example is extreme and rare, it illustrates the importance of group membership in acquiring access to opportunities. This experience is one example of how visibility and community intersect to impact the success of Black women graduate students at UMBC.

Making these connections with faculty can be particularly difficult for full-time workers, who emerged as a unique segment of the Black women graduate student population that very specifically struggles with invisibility. Highlighted by two interview participants, external

responsibilities make it difficult to engage on campus at the same levels as other graduate students. The resulting dearth of opportunities for research, face-time with professors, and opportunities for connection with students, make their graduate experience as different than most of the responders. As one full-time worker, Christine, shared:

“my experience is different - **I’m not involved in the community of UMBC**. Um, I’m a **full-time worker**...I feel like **I’m getting as much as I can get out of it**...I’m really just coming to class. I wish I could be more involved, but that would require me not to go to work and pay my bills \*laughter\*, so I have to...I can’t do that” (Christine, interviewee).

Rachel discussed the different levels of assistance received from her department based on worker status and the impact her invisibility has academically:

“Um, you know...I think that **my difference in treat - not treatment but assistance has to do with me because I am remote**. I think if there’s a student that you know, has a GA-ship and they’re on campus, I think that they definitely have a different experience than I do because you know I work full time and am only on campus... you know, I’m rarely on campus. I think it’s more self-selected, but also think that’s something that UMBC needs to think about too, that **there needs to be, probably some really intentional efforts to capture those people who work full-time and aren’t necessarily as engaged on campus**. just to make sure they get through. Because, I’m... I’m truly off the radar. **I think if I decided I never wanted to finish my dissertation... you know I don’t necessarily [think] people would reach out**” (Rachel, interviewee).

Being a Black woman full-time worker adds a layer of complexity to the mix. One of the respondents mentioned their mortgage and another mentioned family, suggesting that working students have competing financial and time commitments. We also know that White parents are more likely to help their children buy their house than Black parents, and that Black people historically own significantly less wealth. So, in comparison to their non-Black counterparts, Black students are more likely to need to work. Their Black womanhood mark them as more likely to need to work, which contributes to their invisibility on campus (Jones, 2015; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006).

Both students indicated that they have been able to find support with students in their cohorts – both Black and non-Black – particularly with regard to academics, utilizing Google Suite and group chats. Rachel expressed some discontentment with not being able to do group write-ins or engage in more social outings with other students, but overall, connections with other students, as well as the program itself has led to a positive experience. This suggests that their invisibility is strictly in relation to faculty and the department, as the second student discusses in the above statement. She goes on to note that the department tries to keep her engaged, “\*hesitantly\* um...yeah...as much as they could,” via newsletters and events. However, those emails, while informative, are passive instances of involvement where it seems that both reached feel there needs to be more active and purposeful faculty-student engagement. Acknowledging that they are encouraged not to work, Christine shares that she would like more faculty ‘meet and greets’, and that she hasn’t been able to cultivate relationships with faculty. This mirrors sentiments of non-working students, suggesting that for Black women, engaging faculty as part of their community is a priority.

### Community

Community plays a significant role for Black women graduate students at UMBC. Not only does it provide support, comfort and a safe space, but access to resources and opportunities. Based on their responses, student-created communities tend to consist of a combination of faculty/staff, student-focused groups, other students, and/or off-campus support systems. Faculty/Staff and student groups/other students as elements of community are discussed in this section. A key observation of these communities is that they must be cultivated, with the exception of students that enter as part of a fellowship group. Kayla shared during her interview:

**“I definitely feel like I belong, but I also have to cultivate my own community and home actively at UMBC. Um, so it’s kind of like an active thing.”**

## Faculty/Staff

Mirroring Davis, et.al.'s (2004) findings, Black women graduate students find that in order to connect with faculty, administrators, and other students, they must often initiate that connection. For example, those that indicated they had a mentor at UMBC and shared how they met them, most were connected with them through an on-campus job or departmental assignment. The others were products of student initiation, whether following a person of interest after a presentation, applying to that specific person's lab, or being purposeful in engaging in on-campus activities and events. Frankie (survey respondent) shared that she has five mentors at UMBC, with some maintained from her undergraduate career at UMBC:

“I have **at least five mentors at UMBC**. I met two of them when I was an undergraduate; one was suggested to me when I needed research experience and another was a professor of a class I took. As a graduate student, I go to different events on campus and I meet like-minded people (staff, faculty, and students). I have gained my other mentors simply by being interested in the campus and how it operates.”

Frankie's experience is unique, however, as she began her graduate career with an already established on-campus network, as evidenced by her existing mentors and a knowledge of how to navigate the campus. However, of all participants, one mentioned that a White woman professor in her department reached out to her and offered to be her mentor:

“...openly told me like ‘hey, like, **even though I'm in this position, I'm going to serve as a mentor as well**. So even though I'm not your faculty advisor, I will serve as a mentor.” (Kayla, interviewee)

Kayla also shared that while at her conference, a Black woman professor offered to mentor her and other Black women students and felt great about it:

“there's also a black woman, who said like ‘I'll serve as your'...not only for me... but we were at this conference and there were two other black women...black graduate women, and she was like ‘oh yeah, c'mon, I can be a mentor for y'all.’ So like, she's really for black graduate students. \*wistfully\* **I feel it's always awesome when the faculty reach out to you.**”

From this Kayla's experiences, a few key points can be postulated. First, it further bolsters this idea that group membership and identity play a factor in willingness to connect. Both faculty members that offered their support share at least one identity with the student. Second, it reinforces the impact that having a faculty member acknowledge personhood has on Black women graduate students. As discussed in relation to visibility above, the offering of support opposes the trend of recognizing Black women as strong, and either not needing or underserving of assistance, instead emphasizing their humanity. More subtly, it illustrates the sizable difference in the burden that Black women professors often take on with regards to students. Though we are unaware of how many students for whom the white professor has offered to be a mentor, the Black woman teacher offered to mentor three Black women students at the same time, seemingly without hesitation.

Still, this experience of a relationship being initiated by a professor seems particularly unique. Kayla shared that she would like for faculty to be more engaged:

**“I don't think enough of them are as engaged in student progress** and pushing them to say, ‘hey, like..um.. let's do a conference together’ or ‘let's do research together, or um... ‘I see this event maybe you should go check it out’, or ‘you should go follow these people.’”

This sentiment is echoed by students working off-campus, both in their feeling that if they did not reach out – especially during dissertation period – they would be forgotten, and that they would suggest more opportunities to connect with faculty.

During her interview, Jane shared that though she attributes the lack of mentorship and connection to faculty as related to departmental culture, she feels that her Blackness and other unique characteristics have a disparate impact:

**“...not specific to being black ... but does have a disparate impact. I’m not from Baltimore.** Not from MD. and 2. I’m not a part of the social circles and networks that my peers are right, because again, they’re older. Them not getting professional development from [program name] is fine, but for me it has different impact. I think it’s a school issue, not that I’m Black or whatever...”

She does however, feel that her program should have...

**“something separate for black students** because **the barrier to entry** is high and there has been research to show that **black people have smaller networks** because of our income level restrictions and education restrictions...like...we don’t have that same...we just don’t have that same pool of resources.” (Jane, interview participant)

The point Jane raises about the uniqueness of the Black experience and its impact on mentorship is reflected in the literature. For Black women graduate students attending predominantly white institutions in particular, there is a cultural difference in mentor-mentee relationships, with Black women students looking for nurturing, “othermother” mentors that have in-common experiences and can provide “culturally relevant counsel” (Patton and Harper 2003, Grant and Simmons 2008). Interviewed students’ sentiments reflect this preference. When asked why she focused so heavily on building relationships with Black women faculty, one shared that she wanted “insider knowledge” on how to navigate academe as a Black woman and be successful:

**“I need that insider knowledge,** I need to know **what it’s like to be the only black woman** on the faculty board, you know what I mean, I need to know what was your interview process was like, how did you deal with microaggressions in the workplace, like I need to know these things. I also need to know who to watch out for, right. So I’ve heard “I need to tell you, help you build your committee because if this person is on there then no one else is gonna want to be on there so I need...I need the black woman to be like “hey, just to give you a warning...” Like some people have already told me...and you know it may not only be black women faculty, it can be black women administrators, or it can just be ...saying like hey, um, this person has that persona, are you okay? how are you doing? people know, people know stuff.” (Kayla)

Jane shared a similar perspective, emphasizing needing guidance and support around how to cope with the mental and emotional strain of dealing with racism and sexism. This is how she described her ideal mentor:

“So definitely preferably a Black woman because I feel like for...for someone to be a black woman and have gotten their PhD, **then she has seen some stuff, she’s heard some stuff, and she’s navigated it.** Right? But it’s not like she just navigated - she’s had to overcome things and I think that I would want that reassurance that **the sort of microaggressions that I’m dealing with and the blatant racism... she would have those experiences and be able to give me tools to like cope...** I just want that realness... The **relatability** is what I would value most in a mentor.” (Jane, interviewee)

Finally, Taylor shared she had a mentor outside of her department but not within, again emphasizing the importance of a shared identity. Bartman (2015) suggested that, due to the limited number of Black faculty, Black women seek out cross-cultural mentorships, which survey and interview data suggest that most Black women graduate students did. This student, however, provided insight on her definition of mentor and how comfort with discussing personal matters differentiated a mentor from an advisor. When asked why she does not have a mentor in her department, she shared:

“Um. I would say **because they don’t share my...mainly my ethnic background.** ...so **I think it’s just the connection that we make. It’s not there.** It’s not like a mentoring relationship, it’s advising – I think those are two different things. So, as far as academic advising, I think that’s good in some way, or like project advising. but **as far as like mentorship, I wouldn’t get that from them, because I feel like they don’t understand, like my experiences, maybe the issues that I’m going through...**? yeah... I don’t think they need to be separate, yeah.” (Taylor, interviewee)

Jane also highlighted that cross-cultural relationships were not the same:

“There’s like one professor - I can go to his office and have honest conversation with him, **but he’s still a white male,** you know...and yeah he works with black children and in the middle school and everything like that, **but that’s not the same.**”

When considering the weight placed on shared experiences, an interesting dynamic emerges with regard to the relationships – or lack thereof – between Black women faculty and students. UMBC has a very small percentage of Black faculty, marking the Black women faculty as hypervisible, similar to the way it does for Black women graduate students. However, these graduate students seek significant levels of connection to and guidance from these professors,

regardless of departmental affiliation. With a roughly 1:4 (40: 151) ratio of Black women professors to Black women graduate students, these interactions can be taxing for faculty members who must navigate their own hypervisibility amongst their colleagues while building connections with and guiding the students they can. Kayla remarked that a professor she's connected to strategizes how she deals with her white peers to ensure that students have the support they need:

“Like, I know like one faculty - Black woman faculty said, **‘everything I do is strategic, because I know that** umm...I have to represent my students, and build them up.’ and she's already said that oh, some like, some white faculty...you would think that they're for you, but when shit goes down, they say different stuff, like oh... if you're researching black people for example, that's 'mesearch'. not research, but mesearch. someone said that. but oh, what you [white professor] do is research. So stuff like that, you know that like, it's not a cultured working environment” (Kayla, interviewee).

Similarly, it can be a source of discontentment for students who seek and need the connection but cannot find faculty members like them with whom they can connect, or limit connection with those professors because they don't want to overburden them. For Black women students, it is a race to locate faculty with whom you identify to be on your thesis or dissertation committees, to build mentoring relationships, or to conduct research. Kayla went on to say:

“I feel like at UMBC it's hard to know who does what. And they're **overbooked, especially if they're black women**, then they have like **3 times the load or people just come to them**. So I would say that that's the difficulty in that some of the people that I would be interested in...so it's kind of like the **little diamond pieces that you've got to dig through**, like the **black women** you know really at school or whatever. it's so few of us, that **it's like a rare thing**. It's **disappointing, honestly, the lack of availability.**”

As a result, students often turn to each other for that support.

### Students and On-Campus Groups

Some Black women graduate students joined their programs and were immediately contacted by other Black women students, enabling to begin building their communities immediately. Other students, like one of the women working off-campus, took longer to build

those connections, and built them outside of her cohort, but joyfully discusses them and cites as major contributing factor to her positive experience at UMBC:

**“I made friends with someone a little later in my progress.** He had a family, he was being pulled, so we sort of held ourselves accountable, so every Sunday we’re going to come to the library and you know do something. I think that was positive, making that connection. and then [redacted name]... she’s uh, someone I met in this last class, and we were able to connect and she emails me all the time like you know, what are you doing?, and I’m like nothing, \*laughs\* and you know building those connections was kind of nice. I’m not sure why that didn’t happen earlier to be honest... for whatever reason, later on, **I connected with those two and it’s been, it’s been great...**they’re actually not in my cohort.” (Rachel, interviewee)

As expressed below, Taylor shared that she has not really cultivated those relationships and is not sure that it is entirely necessary:

**“I haven’t like built friendships like student-wise really here, well I have like a couple. But I think grad school’s different...** I guess some people have friends \*laughter\*... I don’t know. I think it’s a weird stage in your life where you have like your really close friends from undergrad, and then **you’re kind of just like I’m not looking to build no relationships, as far as students. You have those acquaintances,** but going out on the weekend is not something you would do with like...well, I would do with my peers in grad school.”

However, later in her interview, Taylor did acknowledge the importance of a network or connection to other Black women graduate students, even if she already has a ‘family’:

**“I definitely think that’s [a space for Black women graduate students] needed.** I guess I’m on the fence because like with my fellowship, that already provides that type of family, but **I do think it’s necessary for people who aren’t [in a fellowship].”**

The contradiction in her two responses may be signaling a difference in how Black women graduate students define their community. While Taylor highlights the experience of and need for ‘family’ on campus, she rejects the need for ‘friends’ or engagement with peers away from campus. Knowing that Taylor’s peers are largely white and that she participates in PROMISE-AGEP, an on-campus, institutionalized group that focuses on providing support and professional development activities for students of color in STEM, one could postulate that she associates her

‘peers’ with white classmates and ‘family’ with students of color. Though that conclusion hinges on a number of assumptions, it is consistent with her earlier distinction between ‘mentors’ and ‘advisors,’ which are differentiated by mentor-mentee shared experiences. It is also consistent with research that highlights the tendency of Black women graduate students to overachieve and manage their behavior and presentations of self in oppressive spaces (Shavers and Moore, 2014; Haynes, 2011; DuBois, 1903;).

Other students also highlight these differences in interaction, albeit more subtly. Christine mentions that while she supports and is supported by all students in her cohort academically, through google docs and group chats, it is with Black students that she discusses the informal:

“...group chat and google doc. we post notes there. we text when there’s an email that goes out. we all loathe the same papers and activities. Whole cohort. **It’s not just black people. like we all talk in the group chat, but if it’s jokes or about a TV show, I take that offline.**”(Christine, interview participant).

This also extends to how students observe and process instances of racism. Christine observed that some white students consistently respond differently to Black professors and processed it with other Black students to assess the validity of her observations:

“... one thing that stood out to me is that being in an environment where it’s a mixed crowd of ...different ethnicities, and one particular thing I can see from last semester, I **had a male professor, Black man**, and... I felt...um... rather upset when I would see **some of my white count...colleagues question my professor in a sense where I felt it was demeaning**...it may be because of my lens...and that’s what I’ve been able to notice.... yeah **like a combative nature of responses to some of my professors**... My Black classmates think I’m a conspiracy theorist \*chuckle,\* because I’m like ‘do you notice this? do you notice how she always, you know, does this and does that?!’ and now they’re starting to pick up on it, and they’re like ‘omg you’re so right...’ And **now I have a Black woman professor... and it’s the same students...from last semester...they’re the same exact way** and they’re **not like that when we have guest speakers.**”  
(Christine, interviewee)

In her careful unpacking of observations and the lens in which she is processing those observations, Christine employs the expertise of her Black colleagues to decipher whether what

she's noticing is cultural differences or instances of racism. Her discussion with only her Black classmates may also represent a need to manage behavior so as to avoid the conflict and stigma that has been illustrated by other Black women graduate students in earlier discussions.

To provide more opportunities for Black women to cultivate these communities with each other and build a 'family' on-campus, Black women graduate students are forming an on-campus group for Black graduate student women, as mentioned in multiple interviews:

"We are **in the process of developing a sister circle for Black women** within our program... I think today they're meeting about it., but I'm at work...\*sad chuckle\*. It's like a support group for black women in [program redacted] to...to commune." (Christine)

"I'm trying to start this group for Black women, um, graduate students. with mentoring and networking and all of that... Faculty and admin have been really supportive, like 'oh this is great!' 'oh yeah, we definitely need this. BW in the past have tried to start it, and start talking about it, but it never comes to fruition.' Um...only thing is, getting our membership up..." (Kayla)

Though other on-campus groups exist that support minority graduate students and were mentioned by respondents, – like Meyerhoff Graduate Fellows, PROMISE-AGEP, and Women of Color Coalition – the two most prominent focus heavily on minority students in STEM. For example, PROMISE-AGEP, is sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The strength of students' cultivated community and this community's ability to provide support, comfort, and access to professional opportunities play a significant role in Black women graduate students' feelings of belonging.

### *Belonging*

Overall, Black graduate student women at UMBC are mixed on their feelings of belonging. A mixture of program match, proximity to acts and experiences with discrimination, strength of community, and access to professional development opportunities impact whether or

not Black women graduate students feel like they belong on UMBC's campus and in their department.

Based on interviews, some students feel that their feelings of whether or not they belong or are 'included' on campus are irrelevant because their time on campus is a means to an end and temporary. Two interviewees, Taylor and Rachel, illustrate these beliefs below.

"ehmmm... **I don't know if I would say I belong - I have a place.** But, I don't know if I feel like this is my home or something. **This is something temporary,** like I do this for two years and then I get out" (Taylor).

**"I would say yes, but truly, as a doctoral student it is not applicable.** I mean, you know what I'm saying... My grad experience at [university name redacted]... very very different. But as a doctoral student, it's not even on my radar to feel included. **I'm there for a very specific purpose and I leave because there's work that I need to do.**" (Rachel)

Christine acknowledges that while she feels like she belongs, her experience is different:

"well, my experience is different. I'm not involved in the community of UMBC. Um, I'm a full-time worker... I feel like I'm getting as much as I can get out of it... I'm really just coming to class." (Christine, interviewee)

Kayla, works on campus, shared that she "definitely" feels like she belongs, even though she must actively cultivate her own community. She goes on to share that other Black women students in her program taking the initiative to reach out to her, "helped with regards to feel like I belong."

The last three respondents are all doctoral students in the same program, though at different points in their respective graduate careers. Two of them – who are still towards the beginning of their programs – confidently remarked that they feel as though they belong in their department, attributing that sense of belonging to their love of the program. Taylor remarked:

"...like the program itself is nurturing. like the work that we're reading, that type of stuff, is fulfilling for me because it's what I'm interested in holistically. So, **the program is**

**good for me, so of course I'll be satisfied** because I enjoy the program, I enjoy the content.” (Taylor, interviewee)

In their interviews, both also expressed receiving support from their cohort, and having relationships with other Black students on campus. Both are also involved in the creation of a support group for Black women graduate students. Furthermore, Kayla shared that she has faculty member mentors, both within and outside of their department.

Rachel, who is nearing her dissertation stage, was more subdued in her acknowledgement of belonging and feeling included:

“\*hesitation\*... Um...yeah.. **as much as they could**. They've tried to include me in their newsletters and their events and things of that nature, it's just you know, I work and so I can't really go to campus and do as much stuff...” (Rachel, interviewee).

In opposition to all of the above, Jane, who is also nearing the completion of her program, doesn't feel like she belongs on campus or in her program. When asked, she responded, “Nope! and it's two-fold. I feel like I don't belong because I'm not STEM and I'm not first gen[eration] African.” Jane goes on to explain that she feels hypervisible in her department, she doesn't feel like her perspective is welcome, and that she would likely choose a different program if she could do it over again:

“**If I could do it over again, I don't think I would.** it's not enough. **It's just not enough support.** And you know, **I could blame myself and say it's my fault because I didn't seek out this...but I'm a Black woman in America, I am carrying a lot.** And you would expect that a graduate program would have something in place for their students, especially for their students of color.... and I think it's partially because they don't have the faculty or staff with the forethought or equipped to like build those supports in place. I feel like that's a culture issue...I don't feel like my perspective is welcome...and **I subscribed to PROMISE and some of the other groups, but they're STEM oriented or their programs are at times that I cannot make.**” (Jane, interviewee)

Jane's experience mimics the experience of Black women students at predominantly white institutions of higher education found in the literature (Domingue, 2014; Hurtado, 2014; Shavers

and Moore, 2014; Haynes, 2011; Davis, et.al, 2004; Justin-Johnson, 2004; Chavous, 2000). She does not seem to have cultivated a community on campus. It's unclear the extent of student connections she has on-campus, as she does not describe them. Further, she emphasized that though she has communicated with a Black woman professor in a different program and communicates with both a professor and staff member in her department, the connections have not been deep enough to constitute "mentorship," at least not in the way she needs. She spotlights a struggle with imposter syndrome and difficulty navigating the racism and sexism she experiences both on campus and in her program. Ultimately, Jane feels isolated, which seems to contribute significantly to her sense of belonging.

## DISCUSSION

The literature suggests that Black women students attending predominantly white institutions must navigate both invisibility and hypervisibility (Davis, et. al, 2004). Due to their ascribed social positioning at the juncture of Blackness (race) and womanhood (gender), they face intersectional oppression perpetuated by a society whose institutions and structures are racist and patriarchal at their core. A major product of this subjugation is the silencing and dismissal of their experiences – rendering Black women graduate students as invisible. Further, one's race is largely ascribed by a unique set of phenotypical traits. For example, Blackness is often associated with darker skin, kinky/curly hair textures, and a wider nose. As a result of racist and sexist stereotypes, certain behaviors and personality characteristics are also associated with Black women. The combination of these associations makes Black women hypervisible on predominantly white campuses. This heightened visibility occurs whether their actions oppose or fulfill stereotypes – their mere presence is enough.

As our society moved into the post-civil rights era, laws were changed and it became taboo to be explicitly racist. The result was the development of a more covert and ambiguous

racism, seen in microaggressions as opposed to overt discrimination, which is more difficult to identify and condemn. The diminution of unconcealed racism brought with it a commonly held assumption that we live in a post-racial society, with class emerging as the more powerful source of inequality. However, covert racism, also known as aversive racism, can be just as detrimental to the health and well-being of persons of color (Sue, et.al., 2017). It is largely this aversive racism that respondents describe above. This shift in societal thought can also be seen in how some respondents describe on-campus race relations, ranking microaggressions as lesser than outright instances of racism like offensive writings and drawings. Below, as part of the third research aim, I discuss how the historical experiences of Black women, the contemporary socio-political landscape of the United States, and the noted experiences of respondents intersect.

### *Research Aim 3: The Resolution*

The third research aim focuses on considering the experiences that Black women graduate students have at UMBC and the impact those experiences had, if any, on their success, and deciphering meaning from it in order to propose potential solutions.

First, the survey response and interview data suggests that many of the Black women graduate students at UMBC achieve academically, regardless of their negative experiences. This conclusion is consistent with previous research amongst the same population, as well as in the literature (Black, 2016; Domingue, 2014; Hurtado, 2014; Shavers and Moore, 2014; Haynes, 2011; Davis, et.al, 2004; Justin-Johnson, 2004; Chavous, 2000). This tendency to succeed and achieve in spite of adverse conditions and situations is a product of the narrative that Black women must work extra hard to upend negative expectations and demonstrate themselves as both worthy and capable (Shavers and Moore, 2014; Haynes, 2011; Davis, et.al, 2004). Two instances of potentially negative impacts on academic achievement are one student that indicated she

receives lower grades in a class when she discusses race, and Jane who highlighted her desire to shut down and stop participating in class when her experience is repeatedly ignored or purposely silenced.

The analysis of research data suggests that Black women graduate students have a complicated experience at UMBC. They experience discrimination and microaggressions regularly; seek deeper relationships with faculty; and, they consistently navigate hypervisibility and invisibility, as a result of (1) being the only or one of few Black women in on-campus spaces; (2) sharing their experiences with race and gender; and (3) lower levels of on-campus engagement due to competing priorities, like full-time work and family commitments. Some have been able to cultivate communities that are composed of encouraging peers, faculty, and staff – a safe space for them to be vulnerable, gain access to resources and opportunities, receive assistance, and lighten their load by talking through their experiences. This cultivation suggests that in this context, social connectedness and professional development are interlinked. By expanding their networks, they obtain access to more opportunities, like research, publishing, etc. Others either are not interested in developing those communities or are struggling –due to their own limited availability, discomfort, or lack of knowledge around where to start – and this impacts their sense of belonging both within their program and on campus. Those that have been able to cultivate communities are pleased with their programs and feel like they belong. Students without those support systems feel isolated, struggle to cope with their on-campus experiences, and do not feel welcomed or that they belong.

All interviewees highlighted the need for greater connection to faculty, with the expectation that they should not always be required to initiate those relationships. Specifically noted was a desire for mentorship from Black women faculty, in an effort to gain insight into

how to navigate academe as a Black woman. Here, professional development again emerges as a function of social connectedness. Due to their unique positioning, Black women graduate students will always face multi-faceted challenges that only Black women with similar experiences can truly understand and advise in navigating. Thus, connections with Black women professors (or other Black women professionals in their fields) are an essential facet of professional development for Black women graduate students. However, due to the limited supply and high demand of Black women faculty and the Black women graduate students' recognition of potential burnout as they work to accommodate everyone, students recognize the professors are overburdened, and attempt to mitigate their connections in light of that understanding. So, they instead turn to each other as sources of support and guidance, while working to incorporate professors in a way that may be less taxing. From this development originated the idea for a Black women graduate student organization that aligns a variety of the aforementioned needs while also engaging Black women professors when possible.

## CONCLUSION

In consideration of both the existing literature and the findings of this and preceding studies, Black women graduate students do have a need for unique interventions. However, these interventions may prove beneficial for both the university and the students.

First, as noted by the interviewees, it is necessary that institutions hire additional Black women faculty and staff. This provides additional support for existing Black women faculty and staff, while simultaneously helping students, particularly students of color that would like to connect with someone that has in-common experiences. Additionally, Black women professionals have unique lenses and expertise due their experiences that may lend to new ideas for more robust program designs and considerations.

Second, the administration should facilitate more meaningful conversations about race and ensure that all faculty are trained appropriately with regard to implicit bias. As a school that boasts an array of cultures and understandings, having honest conversations with students and training faculty on how to interface with difference can provide a sense of safety and community for all involved. At minimum, these trainings should be required – as opposed to recommended – for staff, to encourage greater participation. Additionally, when connected with consequences for both faculty and staff that may engage in discriminatory or prejudicial behavior, this is a preemptive measure that may further bolster enrollment, retention and graduation of students of color.

Third, program or department level protocols that allow for more student-faculty-staff interactions should be instated. One example is hosting faculty/staff meet and greets at various times throughout the year and times of day so commuting students working full-time can have greater opportunities to develop relationships, and feel more connected to the campus.

#### *Limitations*

A number of limitations emerged throughout the process of completing this project. First, qualitative research can be a challenge to replicate with exactness, as individuals may shift their responses for a number of different reasons, including comfort with the investigator. One of the most evident is a lack of forethought around the impact of work and other external obligations for participants, which was unrepresented in the survey. Additionally, with an expectation of all in-person interviews, I did not immediately account for students that may not live in Baltimore or have other obligations that significantly limit their availability for additional face-to-face meetings. Finally, I neither collected information about age nor specifically asked about experiences at previous educational institutions. Differences in age and advancement in the life course may explain some of the differences in priorities, particularly around needing or wanting

to belong and tunnel focus on work (Neugarten, Moore and Lowe, 1965). Knowing, at minimum, the category of school(s) respondents attended could also provide additional insight into their previous experiences and how that impacts their perceptions of campus climate at UMBC. Thinking more purposefully around these factors may have also provided more robust data around the working Black woman student's in experience and additional unique interventions that may have been missed. Another limitation is the dearth of international students. As international students constitute the second largest group at UMBC, the absence of their voice and experience is notable. I am unsure as to why they chose not to participate – it could have been the language I used in my recruitment (perhaps they do not consider themselves Black), or the channels of distribution I chose.

#### *Areas for Future Research*

The conclusions drawn from this study suggest that there are common experiences of invisibility and hypervisibility, silencing and condescension, and encouragement from both students and staff. Further, Black women graduate students are in need of spaces to process and connections to faculty and staff that can advise them based on shared experiences. Thus, it would be interesting to explore and compare the experiences of Black graduate student women on UMBC's campus to comparable or higher-resourced predominantly white institutions that have formal or institutionalized efforts around faculty-student mentorship or resources intended for graduate students of color that are not field-focused. Another direction would be to deeply explore the experience of this population at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in comparison to predominantly white institutions.

Additionally, students cited different experiences based on their student status (part-time or full time) and/or their off-campus responsibilities, like full-time work. Thus, research that

compares the graduate school experience of the working student to that of the non-working student would be pertinent. Particularly, it might be worthwhile to explore differences between Black working women and white working women, in addition to the differences intraracially.

Research exploring the Black women student and Black women faculty roles, but from the Black woman faculty perspective is needed. Not only would capturing this experience potentially provide a source of guidance for Black women students without access to Black women faculty, but it will also illustrate any parallels in treatment and experience. Finally, it will give Black women faculty the opportunity to voice their experiences. Taken a step further, this research could compare experiences in Historically Black Colleges and Universities to PWIs and the experiences of faculty members to those of administrators and staff.

Moreover, conducting a similar study with Black women undergraduate students to assess their experiences is an appropriate way to (1) give voice to the undergraduate students' experiences, while simultaneously (2) assessing what aspects of the Black woman experience at UMBC represent the culture of the university and (3) exploring what understandings, coping mechanisms, etc. may emerge with persistence through a degree and maturity.

Further, there is an emergent body of research exploring the differentiation between surviving and thriving for Black women. Expanding upon the insights of this work and utilizing the existing and emerging literature on the topic to develop a model that can define and measure what it means to survive as opposed to what it means to thrive could be key in understanding how the Black woman's position in society impacts them across their life course.

**APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE**

<b>Issue/Topic</b>	<b>Possible Questions</b>	<b>Follow-up Questions</b>	<b>Probes</b>
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	Academically, what expectations do you hold for yourself?		
	Do you feel like faculty and peers hold similar expectations of you?	Tell me more	
	What's your experience in the classroom?		
<b>Social Cohesion</b>	Do you feel like you belong at UMBC? In your department?	Tell me more	You can be honest!
	Are you involved in any on-campus groups?	Which groups?	
	Can you think of a time you were treated differently because of your race and/or gender?	How did that make you feel?	
		Did similar situations happen often?	
	Who treated you differently?		
<b>Professional Dev.</b>	Have you been able to find faculty mentors in your department?	Describe them.	
	Was it difficult?		
	Do you believe that you receive the same assistance as other students in your department/cohort?	Tell me more.	

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS

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### Informed Consent

#### **Are you currently enrolled at UMBC as a degree-seeking graduate student?**

Yes, I currently attend UMBC as a full-time graduate student.

Yes, I currently attend UMBC as a part-time graduate student.

No, I do not currently attend UMBC as a degree-seeking graduate student.

#### **How do you identify?**

Man

Woman

Other (please specify)

#### **How do you identify?**

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Other

Latinx

Two or More Races

#### **Do you identify as an international student?**

Yes

No

#### **What is your country of origin?**

#### **Did you grow up in Maryland?**

Yes

No

#### **In which region of the United States did you grow up?**

*Question only shown to students that indicated they did not grow up in MD*

New England (CT, DE, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT)

Mid-Atlantic (NJ, NY, PA)

East North Central (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI)

West North Central (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)

South Atlantic (DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV)

East South Central (AL, KY, MS, TN)

West South Central (AR, LA, OK, TX)

Mountain (AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, NV, WY)

Pacific (AK, CA, HI, OR, WA)

#### **Are you a masters or doctoral student?**

I am in a masters program.

I am in a doctoral program.

I am in a bachelors/masters program.

I am in a masters/doctoral program.

I am not a graduate student.

Other (please specify)

**APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS (CONT'D)**

**What is your anticipated graduation year?**

*Open ended response*

**What is your cumulative GPA?**

- 3.7 and above
- 2.7-2.6
- 1.7- 2.6
- 1.6 and below

**How would you describe race relations on campus?**

- Excellent
- Good
- Average
- Poor
- Terrible

**Why did you choose this answer?**

*Open ended response*

**Answer Yes or No based on your personal experiences at UMBC: I have experienced racial discrimination on UMBC's Campus.**

- Yes
- No
- I have experienced discrimination but cannot distinguish between my race and gender.

**Fill in the blank: On the basis of race, I feel (or have felt) discriminated by \_\_\_\_ at UMBC.**

**Please select all that apply.**

- Professors/Faculty
- Students
- Administrators
- Staff
- Other
- No One

**Answer yes or no based on your personal experiences at UMBC: I have experienced gender discrimination on UMBC's Campus.**

- Yes
- No
- I have experienced discrimination but cannot distinguish between my race and gender.

**Fill in the blank: on the basis of gender, I feel (or have felt) discriminated against by \_\_\_\_ at UMBC. Please select all that apply.**

- Professors/Faculty
- Students
- Administrators
- Staff
- Other
- No One

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS (CONT'D)

**Are you willing to share your experience with discrimination?**

Yes

No

**Please describe your experience here.**

*Open ended response*

**Fill in the blank: I feel encouraged by \_\_\_\_ at UMBC. Please select all that apply.**

Professors/Faculty

Students

Administrators

Staff

Other

No One

**Describe this relationship or experience. How do (did) the encourage you?**

*Open ended response*

**Is there any person or department you would like to acknowledge for their encouragement?**

*Open ended response*

**What do you look for in a mentor?**

*Open ended response*

**Do you have a mentor at UMBC?**

Yes

No

*The following questions were asked to those that indicated they had a mentor at UMBC*

**Was this mentor assigned to you?**

Yes

No

**Is this mentor in your department?**

Yes

No

**How did you and your mentor meet?**

*Open ended response*

**Do you feel that your mentor helps you the same way they help other students in your class or department?**

Yes, they help all the same.

No, they help me more.

No, they help other students more.

My mentor is not in my department.

I do not have a mentor at UMBC.

**What informed your choice? Was it a specific experience? Please share.**

*Open ended response*

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS (CONT'D)

**What do you discuss with this mentor? Please select all that apply.**

- Professional Opportunities
- Academic/Class related topics
- Personal/Home life
- Other

**Does your mentor share a racial/ethnic identity with you?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**Does your mentor share a gender identity with you?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**How connected are you to non-Black graduate students on campus?**

- Extremely connected
- Very Connected
- Moderately Connected
- Slightly Connected
- Not connected at all

**How satisfied are you with this connection?**

- Extremely satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Slightly dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

**How connected are you to other Black graduate students on campus?**

- Extremely connected
- Very Connected
- Moderately Connected
- Slightly Connected
- Not connected at all

**How satisfied are you with this connection?**

- Extremely satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Slightly dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

**APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS (CONT'D)**

**How connected are you to other Black graduate student women on campus?**

- Extremely connected
- Very Connected
- Moderately Connected
- Slightly Connected
- Not connected at all

**How connected are you to Black undergraduate students on campus?**

- Extremely connected
- Very Connected
- Moderately Connected
- Slightly Connected
- Not connected at all

**How satisfied are you with this connection?**

- Extremely satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Slightly dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

**Do you actively participate in student organizations or other extracurricular activities at UMBC?**

- Yes
- No

**How many organizations or activities are you currently involved in?**

- 5+
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- I do not participate in any organizations or activities

**Is race a chief focus in 1 or more of these organizations?**

- Yes
- No

**Is gender a chief focus in 1 or more of these organizations?**

- Yes
- No

**Are race and gender joint focuses of 1 or more of these organizations?**

- Yes
- No

## APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS (CONT'D)

**Why are you involved in these organizations/activities? Please select all that apply.**

Networking/Professional Opportunities

Social/Fun

Encouragement/Comfort

Self-Care

Political Affiliation/Political Reasons

Academic

Other (please specify)

**Other (please specify)**

*Open ended response*

**Please explain your choice below.**

Open ended response

**You are welcome to share the names of the organizations below.**

Open ended response

**If you would like to be entered into a raffle, please share your preferred email in the space provided below.**

Open ended response

**Are you interested in discussing this topic in a 45-60 minute, in-person, voluntary interview with the PI, Ashley Black (ablack3@umbc.edu)?**

Yes

No

**Thank you for your willingness to participate in an interview! Please complete the form below and I will contact you to schedule.**

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## APPENDIX C – EMAIL RECRUITMENT LETTER

### *Email Recruitment (Departmental, Snowball Sampling)*

Hi [Name],

I hope this finds you well! My name is Ashley Black and I am a current MA student in Sociology. For my Master's thesis I am exploring the Black women graduate student experience at UMBC, and am reaching out to invite you to participate in my 8 minute survey [link to online survey] on the topic! If you complete the survey and share your email address, you can win 1 of 4 Starbucks gift cards!

I am also conducting ANONYMOUS, interviews to both look into experiences, and highlight potential interventions, if results show they are needed. Interviews would be less than an hour, and you will be compensated with a \$5 Starbucks gift card for your time! In the case that timing becomes an issue, and there are enough willing participants, a focus group may be held instead.

If you're interested in being a part, just click yes or no below and let me know! You can add your date/time preferences, too! Also, if you know other Black women graduate students at UMBC, please forward this along to them!

P.S: I live and work in Baltimore City, but am more than willing to work out interview times/places around your schedule and preference - on campus, at a café, etc.

Thanks for your time and I hope to hear from you soon!

**Approved by the  
UMBC Institutional Review Board  
IRB Protocol Y17BW21155**

**Permitted for use  
From 03/07/2017  
To 03/06/2018  
UMBC ORPC: 8/25/2017 11:32 AM**

All the best,

**Ashley J. Black**

MA Candidate, 2017 | Applied Sociology  
*Department of Sociology and Anthropology*  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County  
1000 Hilltop Circle, Public Policy 255  
Baltimore, MD 21250  
(c.) [216.408.5473](tel:216.408.5473) | [ablack3@umbc.edu](mailto:ablack3@umbc.edu)  
[LinkedIn](#)

## APPENDIX D - CONSENT: INTERVIEW ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Ashley Black. I am graduate student in Applied Sociology at UMBC, under the direction of Brandy Harris Wallace. I am asking you to take part in a research study.

I want to better understand how Black female graduate students at UMBC perceive and are affected by the campus climate. I would like to conduct in-person interviews with Black female graduate students about their experiences at UMBC, both positive and negative, as well as their academic achievement and involvement on campus. In total, this will take 45-60 minutes. You will receive a \$5.00 gift card to Starbucks for your participation in this research study.

The research data will be collected anonymously; this means I will not have any links between the research data and your personally identifiable information, including name, area of residence, or student ID number. Your participation in this study may result in some psychological or emotional distress, as I ask that you recall experiences of discrimination and mistreatment. If at any time you feel that the interview is too triggering or makes you uncomfortable to the point that you feel it will be to your detriment, you are welcome to share this with me and I will end the interview.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact the researchers:

**Ashley Black** by email at [ablack3@umbc.edu](mailto:ablack3@umbc.edu) or by phone at 216.408.5473.

**Brandy Harris Wallace** (faculty advisor) by email at [bhwalla@umbc.edu](mailto:bhwalla@umbc.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research study, contact the Office of Research Protections and Compliance at (410) 455-2737 or [compliance@umbc.edu](mailto:compliance@umbc.edu).

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not result in any penalty. You do not waive any legal rights or release UMBC or its agents from liability for negligence by consenting to participate.

Do you understand everything that I just shared with you?

Do you have any questions?

Would you still like to participate in this interview?

Do you consent to participating in this voluntary interview?

May I record our conversation?

**Approved by the  
UMBC Institutional Review Board  
IRB Protocol Y17BW21155**

**Permitted for use  
From 03/07/2017  
To 03/06/2018  
UMBC ORPC: 8/25/2017 11:32 AM**

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