

**As We Trudge Through:
An Autoethnography of my College Experience**

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Introduction

I wonder if something counts as fundamental if the entire world witnessed and experienced it simultaneously. Together, at the same time, we witnessed and experienced the world crumble with no sense of when it would piece itself together again.

I wonder if it is cliché to write about the COVID-19 pandemic. I already see the art, in its many visual and written forms, deriving from this era. At what point does the world become oversaturated with too many Coronavirus stories and “pandemic reflections”?

Through the telling of her own childhood stories and experiences, Chimamanda Adichie warns us of the dangers of the single story. With that, I suppose the fundamental aspect would derive from the reality of people’s varied life experiences. We seem to always be in contrast. Yet, with one failed illustration of a single story of a life, we, disillusioned, find that we are actually quite in sync. It is this thought that I would like to harp on, even if just for a moment right here.

In the following pages, you will read my story—a brief collection of vignettes, reflections, and a few personal archival documents, including a journal entry and a few poems, on what I have found to be fundamental moments from my college experience. It is here that I’d also like to take a moment to express that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted how I experienced college. That being said, in many ways, this piece is more of a critical reflection on a year of overlapping pandemics, exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19, which has been crucial to my understanding of my time here. With this regard, if the pandemic never happened, I suspect that I would not still be writing this autobiographical/autoethnographic piece, or if I were, this narrative would look incredibly different.

I’d like to emphasize that while I share my own story not in hopes to be different, I recognize that my choice to complete my undergraduate thesis in this manner inevitably signals a

difference, or deviation, among academic standards. I hope that the weight of that, as well as the intention and authenticity behind my work, is recognized throughout this body of writing. I'd also like to emphasize that I do not consider this body of writing to be complete. My long term aspiration is to continue to expand upon this work throughout my scholarly career and to ultimately publish it, as one entire body of work and in different forms across several outlets and mediums as well. Despite that, I consider this body of writing to be appropriately complete—or appropriately unfinished—as I close out this particular moment of my life. Lastly, with that, I hope that this body of writing is read with an uncanny sense of familiarity, despite its differences—one that binds us together in the midst of the unknowns and the uncertainties, and even in the midst of the progressions, as we trudge through and attempt to make sense of it all.

August 12, 2021

It is August 2021. I spent most of today packing because I go back to Swat on Sunday for Resident Assistant training, and ultimately for my senior year of college. This past weekend was spent sorting through my sophomore year dorm belongings that I had tucked away in my basement since we were forced home unexpectedly in March 2020. I really did not want to come home then. Me at 19 years old, leaving my empty dorm room, with my body full of fear and uncertainty, is a memory that I wanted to keep packed and covered in the corner of my basement with the objects from that time. This summer was filled with the slow unpacking, and then repacking, of my sophomore year items, along with their memories and associations, as I prepared for my official return to normalcy: reverting back to an in-person undergraduate experience on my college campus. The strangeness that I feel now at 21 years old, returning to the place—with the scattered remnants of my adolescence—that I so abruptly left is a paradox. How can I call something a return, only to prepare for my departure just months later for good?

I hope not to be misunderstood. As I reminisce and grieve the semesters of my college experience that have been lost, I do so with the whispers of reality tittering in my ears. Being a student at Swarthmore has not been easy. Being a Black woman, first generation student at Swarthmore has not been easy at all. Still, I wrestle with another mocking reality, that a potentially joyous part of that grueling, bittersweet year has been stolen from me.

I want it back. I don't know how to get it back.

I don't want to want it back. I don't know why I want it back.

Towards the end of this summer, I have made a hobby out of searching for and applying to jobs. I applied for a Publications Manager position at Wycliffe Bible Translators. Someone, it sounded like a white woman, potentially in her 40s, responded to my application via a phone call. She explained how my work experience at my school's writing center made me exactly what they were looking for. "How soon could you relocate to Orlando, Florida?" "I don't graduate until May 2022... so... not anytime soon." She encouraged me to apply again for a position with the company around this time next year. I promised that I would. Before that phone call ended, I decided that I would find a new hobby.

I reacquainted myself with journaling, and realized how so very bizarre it was that in just a few days, I would be returning back to the place to finish this journey that I started back in the Fall of 2018. It's truly a surreal experience, and especially more so because I am an RA. I will have residents, and it will be my job to help guide their experiences at Swarthmore—whatever this place will be to them. I have yet to decide what this place has even been to me. I have met some of my closest friends, who I love and appreciate so much here. I have been awarded scholarships and fellowships here. Yet, I have felt broken, invisible, inadequate, lost and unwelcome here. At this place. That I am returning to. In three days.

I continue to journal and I arrive at "stepping stone". Swarthmore has served its place in my life as a stepping stone. A stepping stone—after you step on it, it recognizes that its purpose has been served and it slips into the unforgivable, forgotten trenches of your cerebral existence. Yes, I am sure that is what this place has been to me. A stepping stone. And I am thankful. For the scholarship. For the experience. For the people (those whom I love and adore and also those who I

don't). I am grateful to Swarthmore for teaching me everything that I dislike about institutionally oriented communities and for pushing me to consider the ways that I would like to love and to be loved in the communities that I encounter beyond.

I continue to journal and my sparse thoughts transfigure into a prayer. I pray to God that I live to see my graduation day. I pray that it is a proud moment for my mother and for my family. My heart is filled with awe, sadness, contentedness, but mostly shock (if that is even the word to describe it) at what God has brought me through. I trust that this journey has happened/is happening all according to God's plan. Yes, it is happening according to God's plan. Thank you, Jesus.

I continue to pray. And I find myself with a grateful, contemplative heart.

Act Like a “White Man”

I wrote the above piece as a journal entry just a few days before I moved back on campus for my senior year. Typically, when I write in my journal, I never really know where my thoughts will take me. I don't mean that I'm necessarily surprised by what I end up writing about. Instead, I'm surprised by how I end up writing the things I write about. When I sat down in front of my journal that day, I remember being anxious. My anxious thoughts stacked upon one another like they were a promised covenant. Each layer was determined to build a barrier that would force me to forget. After all, the world was fighting to forget. The world was also fighting to regain normalcy—our full return to campus was just one indication of that. But I felt torn. As much as I anxiously wanted to be over with the pandemic and to move past the dark mental and emotional hole that the early 2020s had sucked me into, I found myself grappling with what forgetting and returning to normalcy might mean. If we all returned back to campus, would we forget about our peers who faced housing insecurities or who struggled with technology and internet connection? If we all returned back to campus, would we forget about the Universal Pass debate—for all students to be granted passing credit for all of their courses, without a designated grade—that ensued at colleges across the nation, including Swarthmore? Would we forget the circumstances that prompted our questions about rigor and productivity? Would we be allowed to simply move on, even if we didn't begin to reconsider rigor, productivity, higher education, or any social systems at all?

In a more personal regard, I feared that I would forget how much I felt more like a human, despite the grueling isolation from other people and the dissociation from reality that was induced by the pandemic, during the year and a half that I completed college remotely. I didn't want to succumb to what seemed to be a collective feeling of grief, for our lost college year,

experienced by my peers. It would be too much to handle, ironically, because I was already struggling to wrap my head around a different feeling of grief that I was encountering.

While we were not able to experience our college years in the way that we were “supposed” to, I ultimately felt okay with that because it would allow me to grieve the person who I could’ve become if not for the culture and structures of this place.

To be a Black woman and to be successful, or to achieve, at this institution, you have to give up pieces of yourself. This has become clear to me through many situations, but particularly through a personal account told to me by one of my friends at Swat, Luigi. Luigi is also a Black woman and has taken STEM courses at the College since her freshman year. She and a few other students, other women with underrepresented identities at the College, took Biology 001 their first semester and struggled with understanding the material. It quickly became apparent to them, through talking amongst themselves and talking to other peers, that their struggles in the course stemmed from the differences in levels of preparation that they received in their high school STEM courses compared to their peers and also a lack of acknowledgement of this difference from their professors. So, Luigi and her peers decided to speak to their professor about how they could do better in the course. Their professor dismissed their concerns and flatly told them that in order to succeed at the College they needed to forge past their failures, forget about their other experiences and identities, and to “act like a White man”.

As I listened to Luigi tell me that story, as I was also struggling in my courses and trying to make sense of my identity and background in this unfamiliar environment, it felt like I was receiving a glorious piece of missing information. It all began to make sense. Why hadn't I thought to “act like a White man” before? It didn't matter that I did not personally know what it meant to assume a White man's identity. I had witnessed the White man—across television

shows, on news outlets, in high school through history lessons of the early development of the United States, and in any of the one-off encounters in an obscure, White dominated space that a Black girl from West Philadelphia might find herself in. If I was unsure of how to enter a room on campus, I would learn to dominate and to suck up space from others immediately upon walking through the doorway. If I was uncertain if I knew the answer to a question in class, I would speak anyway, allowing the mere air escaping from my lips to grant me authority and expertise. From that moment forward, I would act as if I was the only person in the room, always. The scene had been set and I would assume the whitest, White man character that I could imagine from my knowledge.

This professor's advice to her struggling students would have been priceless, except it actually carried little value within the grand scheme of how race and gender operates at the College, and within broader society. The way one "acted" or the identity that one assumed, no matter how standardized and desired that identity is in a setting, would do little to combat the reality of how physical racial and gender perceptions influence how people act towards one another, or specifically how people are able to navigate institutions. Still, I warred against reality to become the best White man that I could to fit the expectations of the College. I wanted desperately to succeed and to actually *enjoy* my college experience. However, the reality of my identity constantly clashed with this feeble aspiration. Time and time again, it was confirmed to me that being at this academic institution would require more of me than my intellectual capability or curiosity. This place, and inherently some of its people, would invoke the color of my skin—my Blackness— and the physical appearance of my gender—my Young Womanhood—and my family background as a means to antagonize me. My acceptance letter

into the College would mean nothing if I constantly had to remind myself, and others, that I belonged here.

When we were forced home because of the pandemic during my Sophomore year, my identity and sense of self was shattered. The more time I spent at home, I realized that all I had to reference for the time that I did spend at Swarthmore was a distorted image of myself and my self worth. While my peers were grieving the transformative and life changing college experience that they were supposed to have, I didn't want to lose sense of the reality of how difficult of a time I had by glorifying an anticipated return to Swarthmore College. Assuming a rosy eyed view of my time here would signal the moment that I accepted the contradictions between words and actions that exist in higher education institutions.

Though, interestingly, this wasn't initially the story that I was planning to tell. When I sat down in front of my journal that day, I was anxious, frustrated, and sad. I knew that I was returning back to campus, but I didn't realize the weight and the extent of the feelings I was carrying. I didn't realize that this journal entry would act as an impetus, propelling me into a critical reflection of how the pandemic amplified and exposed the cracks in my undergraduate experience, and the institution of higher education more broadly. What I find even more interesting is the possibility that I would not have even touched this journal entry again if not for the "Classic Black Autobiography" class I took this past fall. Our first assignment for the course asked us to write a brief autobiographical statement that captured something fundamental about ourselves and my mind went to that journal entry because how I was experiencing life and college felt fundamental. It all came full circle for me. More than I realized, I've been eager to think and to write about my college experience during the pandemic and to interrogate the structures that I believe make it difficult for students with historically marginalized identities to

succeed and to *be* well during their time in college. With that in mind, I felt that it was significant to begin this body of writing with the journal entry as a pure archival document. It has been my entryway into thinking more about the significance of examining the personal experiences of students in order to critically interrogate higher education institutions, and it felt fitting to allow this to be an entryway into this body of writing for my readers as well.

“Becky With the Good Hair”

From the moment I started at Swarthmore, I was faced with the infamous microaggression. During orientation week, the residents of my dorm hall were placed into pods of people ranging from six to fifteen people. For the first two weeks or so of my time at Swat, that group of people was all I knew. From the entire pod in my residence hall, I found myself in formation with a group of three other girls, making us a squad of four. Our little orientation squad all got along relatively okay. Except one girl in our squad, Becky, consistently made comments that caused me to feel discomfort on several occasions. One day, when we weren't all together as a squad, Becky and I crossed paths outside of the dining hall as I was exiting and she was entering. She stopped and remarked excitedly, as she looked at me and pointed at the bright, yellow dress that I was wearing, that the color really looked good on people with my complexion. I found myself letting out a chuckle as I meekly responded, “thanks” to Becky.

I'm sure she meant well, though that “compliment” did not make me feel well. As I write this, I still wonder why to this day I remember that brief, likely less than three minute, encounter so vividly. I replay and dissect the words as if they're coming out her mouth in slow motion. I wonder whether people look at the color of my skin and consider the complexities of my complexion. Is my skin color a complexion? Is it not? I've never thought about my appearance in terms of complexion. I was Black. Yet, her comment made me feel embarrassingly Black. Did Becky see the layers underneath my skin? Did she have to?

On another occasion, not too long after our encounter outside of the dining hall, I passed Becky in the hallway of our dorm as I was walking to the bathroom to take a shower. With one hand tightly gripping my towel to ensure it didn't fall, another hand clasping my shower caddy, and both feet quickly scattering down the hall in my shower shoes, Becky waved and planted her

feet in its position indicating that she wanted to have a conversation. My hand gripped my towel tighter as she said, “I heard that people like you with curly texture don’t wash their hair”. Her words—part question, part statement, part challenge—tumbled out of her mouth as she stood with one hand on her hip and the other pointed up at the mushroom shaped shower cap on my head. I looked down, nodded my head, let out a forced chuckle and explained that I indeed washed my hair, but just not as often as daily because it worked better for my personal hair care regime. As I stood in the shower, I pondered in what world did “curly textured hair” become a euphemism for “Black”?

I suspect that these moments were the confirmation to the stark reality that I was slowly coming to terms with. From the moment I stepped onto campus, the familiarity I experienced as I walked down my West Philadelphia highschool hallways of Black students disappeared. Just thirty minutes away from my hometown, I was quickly realizing that my Blackness was an anomaly. What made this realization worse was that I had to grapple with it alone.

Universal Pass

During the Spring 2020 semester of my sophomore year at Swarthmore, I enrolled in a course called “Healing Praxis and Social Justice” (hereafter referred to as HPSJ). This course, through being introduced to healing justice frameworks, theories of disability justice, and mindfulness practices, transformed my understanding of healing. The scientific notion of taking medicine to treat a bodily ailment, or illness, was respectfully pushed to the sidelines, while imaginations of spiritual, emotional, and holistic health and well-being for all marginalized people were brought to light. These ideas were introduced in tangent to the Black Lives Matter movement, and social activism broadly as well. In fact, one of our first assignments was to read the Black Lives Matter’s “Healing Action Toolkit” and to write a journal reflection on it. My experience in HPSJ countered tactics for Black Liberation that, while dedicated to fighting for the wellbeing of the most inferiorized Black identities, were initially committed to an outdated and unimaginative framework for justice. Throughout the semester we discussed healing and social justice not as concepts that were mutually exclusive, but components that needed to exist together. As a result other topics, in relation to health and wellbeing, were brought up such as capitalism, productivity, and disability justice.

Midway through the Spring semester of 2020, on March 17, 2020, President Valerie Smith sent a message to the community informing us that we’d be transitioning to remote learning for the remainder of the semester. What initially was just viewed as an extended Spring break became months of isolation that would lead to an unraveling and questioning of one of the most crucial systems to measure success and accomplishment in the schooling system: grades. While schools across the nation were slowly and reluctantly implementing pass/fail policies, Swarthmore was hashing out a debate of its own. Student activists galvanized with online

petitions and letters to administration to advocate for Universal Pass, so that all students would be granted passing credit for all of their courses, without a designated grade. This was drastically different from a pass/fail grading system because with Universal Pass, there would be no possibility at all for a student to fail. One dissenting perspective to Universal Pass was that prior to the pandemic starting, students worked hard, which should be reflected through a letter grade. Grades were a metric for students that they worked hard for, even when being forced home halfway through the semester. This perspective prompted counter petitions to discreetly float virtually and globally around the Swarthmore community to be brought to administration as well. Once this counter petition was discovered by the broader student body, the campus, fragmented in different parts across the world, joined for hostile debates and heated arguments over why or why not we should be allowed to have grades. Arguments for Universal Pass were that people were dying and that this metric should carry very little weight while the world was attempting to wrap its head around its current health crisis. Arguments against it were for the necessity of grades for graduate school and that students worked hard and deserved it. It was ultimately determined, by the College, that instead of Universal Pass, the disrupted COVID-19 semester would carry a mandatory pass/fail grading system without the option to uncover the grade—as there normally would be under a typical pass/fail credit.

At the end of the semester, I heard first person, and even second person, accounts from my peers about how some professors, whether students requested it or not, and despite the fact that it would add no numerical value to a student's GPA, assigned grades to students nonetheless. Although I consider this to be unacceptable, this discovery was shocking only for a brief moment. Indicatively through the pushback against Universal Pass, grades were deeply embedded into our understanding of how success and value defines achievement in higher

education institutions. Yet, providing grades, even when it was decided that there would be none, shines light on the incongruence in how the College as a whole supports its students, particularly those with marginalized identities and those who come to Swarthmore from underprivileged backgrounds. This also further amplified the feeling that I did not belong at Swarthmore. I was in support of Universal Pass and to see and hear the perspectives of my peers during those tense online debates through our Facebook group illustrated that I and folks who share a similar identity are not a priority at this institution. I couldn't fathom how in that moment, such a thing like a numerical value of achievement and worth could be so important when it felt like the world as we knew it was falling apart. In many ways, the world as we knew it did fall apart. Yet, the classroom space, a space of intellectual cultivation and inquiry, was where conversations about the current changes, and its subsequent impacts on how students were showing up and engaging, did not exist, or existed minimally.

Would it have been an additional burden to talk more explicitly about the pandemic, grades, and productivity in classroom and academic spaces? I remember hearing the sentiment expressed by some of my peers that being able to still go to class and have assignments during the height of the pandemic was a well needed distraction and relief from the current situations of the world. This sentiment feels difficult to fully accept when I know of my peers who struggled immensely to keep up with school due to so many unforeseen circumstances due to being home during the pandemic. Taking "Healing Praxis and Social Justice" just as the pandemic was unfolding was uncanny to say the least. Everything that we were talking about in relation to healing and just taking a more humanistic approach to livelihood suddenly became a test of praxis for real when President Smith sent that email out. Our first test was Universal Pass. The debacle drew into question what it meant to be a Black woman at Swarthmore at that time.

Because of my identity as a first-generation, low income student, the appeal to receive my grades for the semester was strong. Afterall, grades and undergraduate success were touted as my ticket to social mobility for myself and my family. Ironically still, as a Black woman, with the discussions in HPSJ fresh on my mind, it felt like my duty to advocate for a policy that would safeguard everyone during an unfamiliar time in which no one seemed to be safe.

Language and Belonging

As a junior, I applied to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship with my research interests at the time being in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology. I was essentially intrigued by the way that Black people use language, particularly in educational spaces, as a means of knowledge production and community development. It was interesting to me that the validity in which some Black people would present and attempt to share their knowledge would be contingent upon if, or how well, that person is able to fit themselves into the mold of standard English or academic language conventions. One of the origins for my interest in this topic came from my role as a Writing Associate for the College's Writing Center.

During finals week in Spring 2020, I worked remotely for the Writing Center. In our best attempt to still assist writers, we offered writing conferences over Zoom. Typically, in the Writing Center, we'd be given 30 minutes to read a student's paper in preparation for a 30 minute conference that would follow immediately after. We maintained the same structure over Zoom-land. When it came time for my shift, I logged onto the Zoom meeting and was provided a copy of the student's paper. Right away, I recognized the student's name and knew that it was a Black student that I knew from encounters in the Black Cultural Center (BCC) and from around campus. There was not much thought that followed after this except that I was excited to be working with a Black student because representation in the Writing Center, especially during the remote semesters, was low. I began reading the student's paper and could clearly identify that it was written heavily in African American English (AAE). I made a decision not to correct the writing in this regard, but to instead focus on the writer's structure and content. After the conference ended, I contemplated whether or not I should've said something about the student writing in AAE, not because I thought that the writing was bad. I instead worried that the

student's professor would think that the writing was bad. This plunged me into readings on linguistic justice and this interest was fueled even more by taking Sociolinguistics during my junior Spring semester. There exists a plethora of scholarly writing, by Linguists and Educational folks alike (i.e. Sharese King, Nelson Flores, Jonathan Rosa, Geneva Smitherman, and so many others) on the topic of language and linguistic justice in different regards. The following poems convey my thoughts and reflections on the topic as I've interrogated my thoughts and feelings working in the Writing Center and taking Sociolinguistics last Spring: A lot of my thoughts and reflections on it can be reflected in the following poems:

i can't write a poem without the first person "i"

i can't write a poem without the first person "i"

i want for whoever reads this to know that this is my story

that these words are a reflection of life that i've seen with my eyes

that these pencil strokes are my best attempt of materializing

the words boiling up inside of me

no, i can't write a poem without the first person "i"

why should i dress up the emotion

with elaborate metaphors and literary descriptions

i don't think my blackness can be afforded that luxury

no, i can't simply paint a vividly beautiful picture of the
sights and portents of nature
self-removed and re-immersed into the second and third persons
of lyrical poetship

no,
the candid story of i is much more raw than that

no,
i can't make a living off of beauty

my trauma sells more than that

no, no, no
i can't write like that
i can't write a poem without the first person "i"
because what i write isn't just poetry

what i speak isn't meant to be easily digestible for the tongues of appropriating creeps
nah, this be spoken word, this be storytelling, this be
for my people.

—

we do not belong in this institution

our fear of failure makes us feel small
like the universe
when it sinks inside of us
once expansive, all encompassing- sudden collapse
we feel small

because this institution does not fit
the rhetoric is too exclusive
the rules too confusing
the reasoning too foggy
we do not fit in this institution

we seek linguistic freedom
the rhythm of syllables that sway
and bounce in our mouths
and across the fibers of our cheeks
and echo off the enamel of our teeth
we seek that comfort of just being

but,

there is no consensus
on the validity of our speech
we're engulfed in the unrelenting void
indefinitely

and,
we get tired
of fighting
for the system's walls to crack

and,
we get tired
of searching
for the better alternative

we do not belong here
we plot our escape

destination: wherever our speech shines
eta: however long it takes

statement

i never thought that the way i spoke
was a statement
that deviated from the statement that i was tryna speak.

i never knew that the way i spoke
could be political
the kind of politics that stray from election discussions with my friends.

i never wanted my speech
to be polarized,
to prompt correction,
or study,
like a collection of specimens underneath a microscope.

but i've been learning that these words,
(my words)
be doing something to people.

it just riles them up,
makes them infurious,
makes them want to retaliate,

against my infringement
upon their american standards
(their american rights)

and for a long time, i never knew
that the way i spoke could do that.

cause my words just be dancing
romanticizing
the connections between myself,
and the next person,
and the person in between,
cause that's the kind of statement
i want the way i speak to make.

Moving Forward

Sometime towards the end of middle school I became really enamored by the idea of attending college. I describe the feeling as being enamored because my desire to attend college developed suddenly, yet was strong. It occurred during one of my classes. My teacher was absent, so we walked into class to discover that we would spend the next 45 minutes with our dean. Instead of giving us some trivial assignment to complete during the class period, he spoke to us about college. He said that we would soon be transitioning to high school and asked what college's my peers and I were considering. Except for maybe one or two hands that flew into the air, the room fell silent. Prior to that moment, I don't think that I ever really considered college as a place that I would go. I had watched television shows and movies where people went off to college, but it never registered in my mind that going to college was something that I could, or should, do. My dean talked about his alma mater, Endicott College, and from there I felt that I was set. As soon as I got home from school that day, I looked up Endicott College and learned that its bright waterfront campus was located in Massachusetts. This was another shocking discovery for me. Not only could I attend college, but I could attend it in another state. Up until my freshman year of high school, I had never been outside of my Tri-State area. Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware were as far as my feet had traveled.

From that moment forward, I was propelled into an alternate realm of possibilities. Google became my best friend as I discovered college after college. My infatuation with Endicott ended when I stumbled upon the beauty of Bowdoin College in Maine. Some point after Bowdoin, I committed myself to working towards attending Princeton University after a college visit there through the program Women in Natural Sciences (WINS) in Philadelphia. As the scope of where I could attend broadened, I vowed to myself that I would work hard to earn a full

scholarship because I knew that my family would not be able to afford to send me off to any of these colleges.

I don't quite remember the moment when the meaning of attending college, and even college institutions entirely, began to shift for me. It could have been during my senior year when my college visits became more frequent and extensive, as I was flown out and stayed overnight through various college Fly-In programs. It could have been during my last semester of high school when my college guidance counselor sat us down and made us watch "The Hunting Ground", a documentary about sexual assault on college campuses. It was to my horror to discover that Swarthmore, the school who had just offered me the McCabe Scholarship, a full-tuition merit award, was one of the colleges featured in the documentary.

At Swarthmore, I began to think a lot about the structures of college. I found it interesting that colleges were mini societies—they provide housing and judiciary processes like communities. Yet, it seems like colleges don't seem to see this connection. Institutions behave as if the world of the college is separate from the world that we live in outside of the college, yet we've seen time and time again that this is not the case. This sense of invincibility from the outside cruelties or sense of perfection as if everything is already okay and that there is no need for change is incredibly evident in College's responses to activist concerns, or touting themselves as a reprieve from societal issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened my curiosity, as well as my critical eye, towards the system of higher education. I sought, and will continue to seek, after the knowledge of my personal experiences to understand and to move forward. As I stated earlier, I do not consider this body of writing to be complete. In fact, there are more stories that I would like to share. I would also like to revisit the stories that I have already presented. I believe that there is

more to extract, and with that the lessons and critiques will become more clear. My next step right now, at least for a few months after graduation, is to take a break. I am eager to revisit this—to expand on my vignettes, to write more, to potentially talk to other people as I continue to write—but I am content with where this has landed me and I look forward to moving forward as we trudge through and attempt to make sense of it all.

Appendix A: Methodology

Autoethnography is defined by many sociologists as a process and a product. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner describes, “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (ELLIS, 2004; HOLMAN JONES, 2005)... A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. [1]” Additionally, “Autoethnographers have been in the forefront of challenging the traditional written form of the research report. They have drawn on a variety of creative arts genres, including autobiography, fiction, poetry, and performance arts, to share their findings and to make scholarship more accessible. They describe autoethnography as a blurred genre because “it overlaps with, and is indebted to, research and writing practices in anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, journalism, and communication . . . [and the work of] storytellers, poets, and musicians” (p. 765). I want to lean into the fact that autoethnography is a blurred genre. If anything, that is the most significant aspect of this thesis. Also:

In Denzin’s (2003, 2014) pedagogy of hope, writing and performing one’s autoethnographic story is a courageous moral act that says: I am singular and unique; I am telling this story so that you can bear witness; I witness that your story is unique; and, as we are each unique and singular, every person and every person’s experience must be acknowledged and treasured; no-one is expendable.

With that being said, there is no one way to create or produce an autoethnography. Some scholars have been critiqued for their autoethnographies being too sociological/ anthropological and not enough of the literary narrative that is a necessity for telling your story in autobiography. Other scholars have been criticized for their autoethnographies being too autobiographical and literary, arguing that it did not possess enough of the tenets that make it more of a critical body of sociological or anthropological work. I am unsure of how others might attempt to classify or categorize where my autoethnography might land on this spectrum. While to an extent, I consider myself to be both a scholar of Educational Studies and a scholar of Black Studies, I primarily consider myself to be an artist and storyteller. An artist and storyteller trying to make sense of herself in an academic world and the first thing that I want to validate and to make sense of is the notions and concepts of rigor.

My desire to write an autoethnography for my thesis was a way to combine my interests in Black Autobiography and interests in issues of higher education. This “process and product” was significant for me especially because I wanted to subvert traditional ways of producing and making meaning of knowledge in higher education spaces. The institutionalization of Black Studies as an interdisciplinary field in academia illustrates the ways in which knowledge—especially coming from Black people—is more privileged when it comes from an “educated” scholar. However, the statistics of Black education, and even the development of programs such as the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship show us that Black representation in higher education isn’t something that we necessarily have an abundance of. So, then what exactly gets privileged in these spaces is the smallest representation, if only few Black Scholars exist here, of Black life and experience. Already, it is tricky, and even detrimental to even attempt to encapsulate or boil down a Black experience to select individuals. W.E.B Dubois’ notions of the

talented tenth were later criticized, and still deemed controversial, for this exact reason. So, when knowledge is left to be epitomized solely by Black Scholars, there is a problem because it barely touches the surface of Black issues and the goal of Black Liberation as a whole. I recognize the potential contradiction and conflict of my own positionality as I write this. I have been privileged to participate in several college access programs and extracurriculars throughout high school that eventually led me to be currently positioned at Swarthmore College. In many ways, writing about my college experience as a Black woman at this elite liberal arts college is the exact sort of polarizing experience that I am referring to when I write. As a recipient of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, I have to recognize that there is a potential that someday my voice might be valued more than another Black person's voice simply because of my doctorate and placement in academic spaces. Through writing an autoethnography for my thesis, I would like to simultaneously write about my own personal experiences, as a way to valorize stories as a way to give and receive knowledge and wisdom. For me, part of this stems from Black oral traditions and that is incredibly significant to me. I have spent the majority of my Fall semester reading various autobiographies and I can wholeheartedly say that my life, or at least thought processes towards life, has drastically changed because of it. Black Autobiography provides a lens for all the histories and experiences that might not have an historical event enough to make it into textbooks.

This fact was particularly illuminated to me during the fall semester of my senior year when I took English 062: Classic Black Autobiography. We spent a large portion of this course discussing what it means to write a Black Autobiography. Between postulations of the meaning of a chapter of William Pickens' *Bursting Bonds* to speculations of what it truly means for Zora Neale Hurston in *Dust Tracks on a Road* to be considered a cosmic creature, we find ourselves

right back at the core of the conundrum. Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, Lorde, Angelou, hooks, etc, etc. These are all authors primarily. Literary producers. Individuals who have merely replicated (used loosely) on page the early childhood and adult experiences of their life. Yet, these individuals are also Black. By ways of social and political designation, that automatically designates these literary works into political and social statements. These individuals and their respective biographies become pieces of text that serve to work as a sort of concrete body of Black representation, though it is never truly concrete and can hardly be considered whole representations. Still, even though a Black author might not even write with the intention or perspective of educating others or serving as a representative or token of the Black community, it seems that the entrance into the genre of Black autobiography automatically does this.

So, what do we do with this designation? How do we reconcile it? In class, one person spoke about how these texts, specifically the Autobiography of Malcolm X tends to not serve any purpose besides academic use inside of a classroom. Which is a valid point. A lot of books are read in class, but then what happens beyond that? Students write a paper and then move on with their lives. I supposed that the work of the Autobiography happens through the shift in consciousness that it causes. Let's think of that as the process of osmosis for now, or at least until I can think of a better way to describe that in literary terms. What about embodiment? If Malcolm X's autobiography is a political charge to galvanize folks into action, then how are we doing so? Especially in an age that doesn't feel as urgent as the times that X was writing about or living through. We have the summer of 2020 events with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor that sent the country into an uproar of protests and actions throughout the chaotic mess of a year that we called 2020. Though, I hope that it is not premature to say, but if the works of autobiography were to do this, galvanize people and cause people to go up into arms, then we'd have a sort of

uprising almost everyday in America. Because we are not yet free. And Because that is what Malcolm X seemed to have wanted? And what about other authors and Black autobiographies and memoirs? How do we utilize (honor?) them? Is it enough to merely read these texts and hope that we revisit them at some point again in our lifetimes? In a way, that feels like a disservice. To these authors, to our ancestors, and to the everlasting struggle for Black Liberation, which the 21st century has dubbed “The Movement for Black Lives” or the Black Lives Matter Movement. In writing an autobiography myself, I aspire to read these texts as a starting point for reflection and to continue to process of sharing and viewing personal experiences

We learn from Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that Black artistry is indeed political in that its reflection is crucial for the progress and expression of Black people and that Black people have plenty of experiences to draw from and to write about. He urges Black writers to overcome this “racial mountain” by not pandering to white folks and by not minimizing their voices as Black authors. Ironically, we also learn from Langston Hughes that Black artistry is also political in that Black art is policed and weaponized against us so that we feel paralyzed to actualize its full potential. The piece “The Elusive Langston Hughes” by Hilton Als critiques Hughes for doing the exact opposite that he urges writers to do. Quoting some “shallow” and unmeaningful works by Hughes, Als argues and critiques that Hughes made himself appear less than what he was for the sake of being more palatable to white audiences. Again, what do we do with work like this? How do we apply these works?

This thesis has been a work that has experienced many different forms and possibilities of conceptualization. I knew that I wanted to write about Black Autobiography. I have always found myself, encapsulated by, enchanted with the stories and narrative of Black folk. Perhaps reading the works of others has made me eager to picture myself in the position of storyteller. I’ve

learned and am okay that the designation of Black authors as political and social representations is one that is inevitable. The ordinary and “mediocre” lives of Black people have been deemed political and speculative for decades now. But if to any extent, these works are meant to galvanize, then I would like to partake and to use myself as the data point to immerse myself into these experiences, ultimately centering myself. One of the most significant things that I’ve learned from autobiography is how the self could be used as an entry point for broader conversations. That being said, I wanted to incorporate archival documents, forms of creative expression that scholars don’t always incorporate into autoethnography. This has allowed me to critique the culture of Swarthmore through my own experiences and to further delve into the concept of using the self as a site of experience and understanding.

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Appendix B: Literature Review

As I embarked on the process of writing this autobiographical/autoethnographic piece, I recognized that its contents would differ from that of a traditional thesis. I also recognized the value of developing a deeper understanding of how the system of higher education functions and operates. I wasn't initially sure of how I might "illustrate" the work and rigor that I put into thinking about and preparing for this project. I wanted to just write, and allow for its contents to do all the work of conveying its significance and context. It was a bit of a conflict for me to think about how I would even write a Literature Review because it is a convention of the exact standard that I wanted to deviate from. When I imagine oral traditions and the self as a site of wisdom and knowledge, I don't think of drawing on previous knowledge as compartmentalized, but instead interwoven throughout. I reconciled that by acknowledging the significance of being able to specifically and concisely draw on the work that has already been done. I do not believe that what I am writing about is unique in that it is being written about. I do believe that what I am writing about is unique in that this form is not undertaken much often by scholars. This literature review will examine a few texts and specifically address, and think about, the ways in which the literature that I read spoke to my experiences and the ways that it did not.

The Privileged Poor

A text that has been helpful to anchor my observations is Anthony Abraham Jack's *The Privileged Poor* (2019). "But a sense of belonging—as amorphous as it is essential—is an aspect of the college experience that scholars who study higher education tend to downplay. Our efforts at understanding college tend to focus more on differences in quantifiable outcomes, like grades and graduation rates, than on students' day-to-day reality." (28, Jack) This sort of observation

also helps to situate, and to provide a perspective, as to why it is valuable to use autoethnography as a method for my thesis. I aim to use my personal experiences in college to illustrate some of the real issues of being in college with my identity, in a way that doesn't downplay the significance of that sort of narrative. After finishing Part I "Come with Me to Italy", I am wondering what else AAJ might cover and lead readers to think about. I think that his distinctions and observations between the Doubly Disadvantaged and the Privileged Poor are valuable. However, I can't help but to think about myself along those categories and begin to think that there is an interesting gray area between the two. I wouldn't consider myself to be DD in the ways that AAJ describes it, but I also wouldn't consider myself to be PP. I did not attend private school, and I have not experienced being in close/intimate proximity to wealth, but I have experienced being in rooms with "elite" individuals. Coming to Swarthmore wasn't a shock to me in the ways that I was able to navigate the spaces, communicate with my professors, and utilize resources, because I had participated in several college access programs, that allowed me to have some experiences of travel, that paid for me to receive ACT/SAT tutoring, that paid for me to go on college tours overnight and to be exposed to what my college life would likely look like. So, where would someone like me, with similar experiences lie along that spectrum? Are the DD and PP sufficient categories for thinking about "disadvantaged" students' college experiences?

By Jack's definition of the privileged poor and the doubly disadvantaged, I don't fit quite neatly into either of those categories. It is unclear if Jack actually believes that traditionally marginalized students will simply fall into these two categories; however, I will be looking at distinct experiences through the lens of: the classroom, curriculum, teachers/faculty, and social life. From K-12 and from my higher education experiences to examine closely these

categorizations, the significance of investigating personal, and not just academic experiences of students, how one might deviate, and what the overall significance of that is. By the end of this thesis, through autobiographical narration of my experiences followed by critical analysis, I hope to underscore that although my academic experiences have been rich, the support wasn't there. More than a rich curriculum is needed to provide a holistic, fulfilling, and culturally relevant education.

Authentically Me

In this piece, Winkle-Wagner et. al (2019) use the “Unchosen Me” theoretical concept to explore aspects of identities that are ascribed by members of colleges and institutions.

The authors draw on Kimberle Crenshaw to explain, “Identity politics, the coming together of individuals around a common identity, may highlight the way in which inequalities that were once seen as isolated are both social and systemic (Crenshaw, 1991).” The “Unchosen Me” concept was incredibly helpful in understanding the ways in which I felt pressured to change myself for the sake of fitting into the institution. This is especially evident in the vignette, “Act Like a ‘White Man’”. In other ways, I have noticed the ways that Black students are not granted the space to just be students; they must also serve as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practitioners, representatives and advocates for the College.

This piece prompted a lot of questions for me to examine my own experiences: What does my own “Unchosen Me” look like? Has this “Unchosen Me” remained? In what ways have I countered the “Unchosen Me” and crafted my authentic self? Why is it that during my junior year of college, a year that I spent entirely remote, that I, despite the conditions of the pandemic, enjoyed my college experience the most? This piece also prompted me to think about the ways in

which ideas of the “Unchosen Me” are similar and different to ideals of assimilation and how both can be viewed as interesting processes of losing your voice, with the distinction of the “Unchosen Me” being that the “authentic self” is your active rebellion of keeping your own voice.