BEYOND KENTE CLOTH AND KWANZAA: INTERROGATING AFRICAN-CENTERED IDENTITY IN WASHINGTON, D.C

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I dedicate this dissertation to the daughters and sons of Africa, within and beyond her borders; to the ancestors and those waiting to be reborn. This labor of love I dedicate to my family, who provided me a foundation upon which to stand, and wings with which to soar. I especially dedicate this work to the memory of my maternal grandmother, Evelyn Spinx Lawrence, who mailed me handwritten letters, took me to classes with her at Camden Community College and inspired my love for learning. She planted the initial seed of her granddaughter becoming a doctor. Here’s to you, Grandma!
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ABSTRACT

Kente cloth, the brightly-colored, traditional woven cloth from Ghana, West Africa, has come to symbolize a marker of African identity when worn by African Americans. Similarly, the seven-day cultural celebration of Kwanzaa has become a popular way for some African Americans to commemorate their connection to African cultural customs. Yet, beyond these symbols of cultural identification, my research examines how communities of African Americans understand and express their sense of connection to Africa and how it is they attach significance to that connection.

The site for this research is Community Charter School (CCS), an African-centered charter school in Washington, D.C., an auspicious site for examining issues of Black identity, due to its historical significance as a location of Black activism, mobility, and cultural expression. Yet, my focus is less on pedagogy and more on how the various constituents within the school assign value to it as an African centered space. Within this school space, three distinct constituencies emerge: minority educators, majority educators, and youth, who hold varying views on the salience of the school’s African-centered approach and its significance for African American families and youth. My study amplifies the multi-vocality around Black identity that exists in school spaces, even those that are founded upon a notion of solidarity among people of African descent. Moreover, my findings also demonstrate how neoliberal discourse, as

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1 Kwanzaa, which is Swahili for first fruits, was created in 1966 by Black nationalist Maluana Karenga. The holiday was inspired by harvest festivals held throughout sub-Saharan Africa and is based upon the integration of seven principles that function to guide and unify Black people in America and throughout the Diaspora.
exemplified by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), confounds schools and amplifies tensions around class, competition, and Black belonging. While African-centered schools exist, in part, to counter notions of hegemony, individuals within these communities often reflect the race, gender, and class normativity existent within mainstream society. This study invites a more nuanced interrogation of African-centered communities and also demonstrates the utility of single sited research in capturing the rich variability of the African Diasporic experience in a globalized world.
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I am also grateful to the educators, parents, and students at Community Charter School who shared their time and thoughts with me. I am humbled to have been able to conduct this research in my hometown among people whom I care about so deeply and with whom I share an ideology of liberation and love for Africa and her peoples.

In the final months of birthing this document, a few key people emerged as pillars of support, serving as angels, cheerleaders, critics, and guides: Dr. Ariana Curtis; Dr. Arvenita Washington Cherry; Dr. Calenthia Dowdy; Dr. Malinda Rhone; Dr. Tiwonna DeMoss; and, Dr. Cristi Ford. I have also been blessed to have a loving group of mother-sisters to lean on for support when this task was daunting. They always came through with words of strength and encouragement and never stopped believing in me — Mama Amshatar Ololodi Monroe, Mama Sandy Olufonde Rattley, Mama Baiyina Abadey, Mama Wala Omilade Bernard, Mama Sharon Omosade Mahoney. I send an extra special thank you to my dear friend Zulfiqar Jamil, who kept me company “on many a night” at Busboy’s and Poets while I wrote and rewrote. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), my second home, and the place where I began to find my academic voice. To my students at UDC, you were one of my major motivations for pursuing graduate work. In exchange for the years of labor it took me to complete this task, I say, “Watch out! We’ve got work to do!” Finally, I must acknowledge my greatest inspiration, my indefatigable daughter, Ms. Zora Audrey Yetunde Chatman, for her exuberance, genius, and luminance that championed mommy through many moments of doubt and exhaustion.
This document represents a journey of thought, an evolution of scholarship, and a maturation of self. Various iterations of it have journeyed with me to Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Georgia, New Jersey, and throughout the D.C. Metropolitan area. I have massaged this document into being at coffee shops, libraries, retreat houses, and my mama’s dining room table. Moments of clarity came in the middle of the night, while driving home, during conversations with my advisor, right after praying, and sometimes, in the midst of a good cry. I could not possibly recognize everyone who lent their prayers and support as I traversed this road but know that I am eternally grateful to all of you. This accomplishment is but a mere testament to the indomitable power of co-creation that we each possess.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

This dissertation examines how communities of African Americans understand themselves as being connected to an African Diaspora. The primary site for this research is Community Charter School (CCS), an African-centered charter school in Washington, D.C.. In researching how people understand and live their connection to Africa in this school space, I am interrogating the meanings around how people construct a particular kind of “Black experience” based on connections among children, adults, families that comprise this school-community. In answering this question, I examine how constituents at CCS assign significance to the African-centered aspects of the school and how that perception serves as a basis upon which they build their sense of connection to Africa and an extended Black community.

My findings demonstrate that three distinct groups: minority educators, majority educators, and youth, held different understandings about the school as an African-centered space and the value of that designation. My research demonstrates that although these spaces are depicted as possessing a singularized notion of Black identity, which is rooted in a positive orientation toward African peoples and the adoption African cultural practices, this is very much a contested notion. Further, while African-centered spaces exist, in part, to counter notions of hegemony, individuals within these communities often reflect the race, gender, and class normativity existent within mainstream society. This research seeks to disrupt notions of a

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2 African-centered schools are those founded upon a pedagogical approach that centralizes the history and cultures of Africa creating a more culturally relevant and thereby, empowering educational experience for African-American students. The terms Afrocentric, African-centered, and Africentric are used to refer to a very similar educational phenomenon. For the sake of clarity, I will use African-centered education to refer to schooling environments built upon African descended identity, history, and culture.

3 Charter schools are public schools that are run by community groups, or for profit educational organizations. They are public schools but have a degree of autonomy that traditional public schools do not possess. I offer a more detailed discussion of charter schools in Chapter 2, Literature Review.
singularized way in which African descended people see and express themselves as connected to an Africa Diaspora. African-centered identity, like other identity formations, is also highly variable, and is contested, and negotiated in everyday life (Baker 2004).

Although this research is anchored in a school, this dissertation is not school ethnography in the traditional sense. Rather, the school serves as a focal point through which I examine issues of Black identity as they are unfolding in Washington., D.C., which I situate as a deterritorialized site of African identity construction (Clarke 2004); and as they are reflected in academic and popular discussions of Black identity. Washington, D.C., is an auspicious site for this study due to its prominent role in advancing Black arts and culture, as well as social and political mobility since the early 20th century. The 1960’s saw the rise of Black resistance movements and cultural, student activism, and numerous communities forming on the basis of a Pan African and Black nationalist identity. D.C. is now home to a number of, what I designate as, African-centered cultural, religious, arts, and educational organizations and individuals for whom their sense of themselves as part of an African Diaspora plays a central role in how they live and how they identify. Members of these various African-centered communities, express this identity through their involvement in African religious organizations, West African Drumming and Dance Troupes, African-centered independent and public charter schools, and businesses. The African-centered communities in D.C. are also visible through the various festivals and programs held in the city that commemorate African Americans’ historic and contemporary, real and imagined (Hamilton 2007), connections to Africa such as Kwanzaa, African Liberation Day, and Black History Month. These forms of African Diasporic identity expression, of course, do not

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4 African-centered independent schools are private, tuition-based schools that utilize African-centered pedagogical approach. African-centered charter schools are public schools that promote African-centered approaches to education. A more detailed discussion of these types of schools is offered in Chapter 2.
constitute the multiple and varied ways that people express their connection to Africa. My mention of them here is not to prioritize them over other ways of expression, but rather to establish their relevance for this particular study.

While such African Diasporic vibrancy exists here in D.C., the city is also experiencing marked demographic change that is drastically altering the racial and cultural landscape of the city. Like many other urban communities, D.C is rapidly gentrifying where the influx of wealthier, mostly White, but some Black, residents is changing the character of predominantly Black neighborhoods (Hilton 2011; Neighborhood 2010, Wax 2011). U.S. Census data shows that the Black population in decreased by 39,000 nearly 40%, between 1970 and 2010, much of it due to Black migration to the suburbs where they could obtain larger houses for lower prices.

The population shifts occurring in D.C., currently however, are due to urban revitalization and gentrification. Data from the 2010 U.S. Census reveals that the Black population in D.C. has decreased by 27,000 residents. Conversely, more than 40,000 whites have moved into D.C. in the last decade (U.S. Census, 2011). The Black population in D.C now stands at barely 50%, a startling shift in a place dubbed Chocolate City⁵ and that that has served as a symbol for Black social, political, and economic mobility. Thus, a secondary aim of this dissertation is to examine the extent to which the city’s changing racial and economic demographic constrains or enables people’s expression of African-centered identity in D.C.

**Research Goals**

This study was initially designed to examine African-centered education as a form of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995). I designed my dissertation proposal and research instrumentation with the intention of obtaining data on classroom pedagogy, and school

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⁵ Parliament Funkadelic, a popular funk band during the 1970’s wrote a song called Chocolate City which sang of D.C.as a significant player in the social and cultural landscape of Black America.
interactions and their implications for African American youth’s racial identity development. However, as is common with such endeavors, I changed the course of my research while in the field. As my research progressed, the data that emerged from my field notes clearly illuminated a more foundational concern that warranted examination. Thus, I re-directed my research to focus on how the various players at CCS valuate and evaluate their connection to an African Diaspora.

Three sub-questions are central to my research project: 1) How do the parents, teachers, and students at CCS perceive the school? Embedded in this question are what is their motivation for being at the school, what are the tensions at the school, and how do they reflect tensions occurring in other African-centered spaces in D.C.?; 2) How do the discursive and pedagogical practices at CCS reflect how people assign significance to the school as a site within the African Diaspora; and, 3) How is the African-centered schooling experience impacted by local and extra-local processes such as national education legislation, D.C. gentrification, and the growing income disparity occurring in D.C.?

Situating the Study

I situate this research within the literature of African Diaspora and studies that have been oriented around African American identity. In addition to anthropology, the disciscp history, and sociology, are among the disciplines that have most thoroughly addressed how Blacks\textsuperscript{6} construct identity based on a sense of connection to Africa. Yet, even within those disciplines, scholars approach diaspora from various positionings. Contemporary dialogues about the African Diaspora represent varied perspectives and debates (Gomez 2004; Lemelle and Kelley 1994; Hamilton 2007).

\textsuperscript{6} I intentionally use “Black” here to be inclusive of African descended people throughout the diaspora.
In numerous ways, through scholarship, activism, the arts, and economic, religious, and political movements, Black people have sought to connect with Africa. Schools of thought that have dealt most directly with this body of knowledge\(^7\) include Pan Africanism\(^8\), African Diaspora Studies, Black Nationalism, Afrocentricity and African-centeredness. I am less concerned with the histories of these various ideologies, although it is important to acknowledge the precedents of contemporary discussions of African Diaspora studies. Rather, my aim here is to contribute to the nuanced discussion of African Diasporic identity by providing yet another site where people are working through these considerations. In a sense, my study aims to “bear witness” to the continued negotiation in which African Americans are engaged around their connection to Africa, within an urban environment, and a school space founded upon notions of an Africa as the ancestral and cultural homeland of Black people.

The framework of my research is largely informed by the work of anthropologist Kamari Maxine Clarke (2004) and her examination of the deterritorialized networks of Yoruba religious practitioners in the United States and Nigeria. Clarke explores in her work, how identity is negotiated through transnationalism, state power, and globalization. In a similar fashion, my research interrogates how the experience of African Diasporic identity is negotiated through the bi-directional movement of local and extra-local (global) processes including federal education legislation, the socioeconomic realities of the families, internal school tensions, and a multi-vocality around Black and African identity. Thus, in answering my research question, I examine what it means to live an African-centered, Diasporic identity within a climate of stringent educational reform and intense political and economic change in the District of Columbia.

\(^7\) These philosophies are popular conceptions of Diaspora as experienced in the U.S. However, negritude movements in Europe and Latin America (Gomez 2004; Hamilton 2007), are also worth noting.

\(^8\) Even among proponents of Pan-Africanist ideology, there were distinctions in how St. Clair Drake, W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, William Blyden, and Kwame Nkrumah interpreted this philosophy.
Overall, my study adds nuance to the discussion of how communities experience themselves as part of an African Diaspora in the 21st century that lend to personal and community-based definitions of Blackness that are both similar and different from classical academic and popularized definitions of Black identity. The varied and often contradictory notions of African-centered identity that exist at CCS, serve as a window into a larger dialogue on Black identity and connections to Africa occurring beyond the school’s walls.

**Background**

Black Nationalism and African-Centered Schools

As an outgrowth of the Black Power Movements of the 1960’s, activists established Independent Black Institutions (IBIs), also called African-centered schools, as educational alternatives to what they perceived as the dominating Eurocentric model of education within the public school system. The Council of Black Independent Institutions (CIBI)\(^9\) was established in 1972 with the ultimate goal of creating an independent Black nationalist educational system.

Proponents of these schools advocated a version of education that promoted liberation from the manifold forms of oppression that Blacks face in what they perceive as a racist, neo-colonialist, and white supremacist America. As such, these schools adopted an educational philosophy that was overtly political and that centralized, rather than marginalized, the history, culture, and lived experiences of people throughout the African Diaspora (Akoto 1994; Asante 1991; Boykin 1983; Delpit 1992; Foster 1993; Giddings 2001; Hale-Benson 2004; Henry 1998; Hilliard 1992 and 2001; Kunjufuu 1998; Sefa Dei 1994; Shujaa). Such schools were often staffed by individuals and families who were involved in Black resistance movements and as

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\(^9\) CIBI remains in existence today. I attended a CIBI conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in October 2007. The organization has established principles of Africa-centered schooling that their member organizations implement at their discretion.
such, advanced an ideology of Black liberation and Black Power in their academic and youth socialization processes\textsuperscript{10}. These schools were located throughout the nation in many urban areas where Blacks predominated such as Trenton, New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; and Palo Alto, California. Washington, D.C. Though some of the earlier schools of the 1960s have closed due to internal struggles and shifts in the political climate of the 1960’s which spawned their birth, many of these schools remain in existence today (Lee 1992; Ratteray and Shujaa 1992). Like in other urban centers, Washington, D.C, also birthed Pan Africanist and Black Nationalist communities, members of which, opened private, independent schools. The independent African-centered schools in Washington, DC include ROOTS Activity Learning Center\textsuperscript{11}; Nationhouse; and Ujamaa Shule, (a Swahili term that means “community school”) which was founded in 1967 and reports being the oldest independent African-centered school in the nation (Washington Informer 2010).

**African-Centered Charter Schools**

African-centered schools, in the form of charter schools\textsuperscript{12} have also emerged in recent years, as a way to provide innovative educational options to African American students. African-centered public charter schools now exist in Detroit, Michigan; St. Paul, Minnesota; West Palm Beach, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and in Washington, D.C. (Akimbo 2009). In the sense of pedagogy, these schools attempt to offer an educational alternative that is empowering for African American children. Charter schools have a relatively greater degree of autonomy than traditional public schools, and because they are supported with public funds, are able to

\textsuperscript{10} More history on African-centered schools is offered in Chapter 3, Context and Setting.

\textsuperscript{11} ROOTS Activity Learning Center is not listed as a member organization on the CIBI website but the first-hand researcher knowledge verifies that it is a privately owned African-centered institution

\textsuperscript{12} A more detailed discussion on charter schools is offered in Chapter 2, Literature Review.
appeal to a broader audience of Black families than perhaps private, independent, African-centered schools that charge tuition. With these conditions, charter schools may be ideally positioned to cater to the cultural, social, and educational needs of urban African American students.

Unlike public schools, African-centered charter schools have an implicit political goal at promoting an “African consciousness” among its youth. Thus, school practice and curricula may diverge significantly from what is offered in traditional public school settings. Several schools I have observed in Washington, DC, area share symbolic expressions of African culture such as the use of African expressions within the school; the adoption of east and west African names for people and objects; the use of mostly west African attire in daily manner of dress; the inclusion of West African dance and drumming in varying aspects of school culture; and the incorporation of African religious customs into school practices. For example, many schools have adopted the practice of pouring libation¹³ (a form of prayer that involves pouring drops of alcoholic beverage (most often gin or vodka) or water onto the ground) to acknowledge family and community ancestors, before the start of certain ceremonies and programs. Similarly, in many African-centered schools, adult women and men are addressed as Mama and Baba, respectively, mirroring a practice common among several west and east African ethnic groups. It is important to examine, as my research does, how constituent groups at these schools assign meaning to these practices and uncover the potential tensions and contestations that might be present in these spaces and expressions of identity. These schools, I argue, represent more than a community’s desire for an educational alternative, but they also represent spaces of African Diasporic identity.

¹³ Libation is a form of prayer that involves pouring drops of alcoholic beverage or water onto the ground to acknowledge ancestors and deities. It is done in various West African religious (Mbiti 1969).
construction, where African Americans are working out their varied meanings about themselves as people of African descent in the 21st century.

Charter Schools in D.C.

In Washington, DC, PCS are often perceived by parents as glimmers of hope for quality education in a school system that has been fraught with bureaucracy and low-performing schools for years. That hope is vividly captured in David Guggenheim’s widely popular documentary, Waiting for Superman: How Can We Save America’s Public Schools (2010). The film follows several families as they navigate the maze of the public school system in Harlem, New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, California, and then as they undertake the arduous and emotional challenge of trying to enroll their children into competitive charter schools. One grandmother tries to enroll her insightful ten-year old grandson Robert, into the SEED Academy, an urban boarding school in Washington, DC. The popularity of charter schools is evidenced by their steadily increasing student enrollment and the dozens of new applications that the DC Charter board reviews annually from community groups and organizations seeking to open a charter schools.

DC’s cohort of PCS offers a range of specialized areas of focus including technology, college prep, the arts, math and science, and literacy. Yet D.C. PCS are not without their challenges. Some schools have had their charters revoked for failure to maintain enrollment, financial mismanagement, or failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as mandated under No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB). Moreover, although charter schools are theoretically “open and free to the public”, some scholars have raised concerns about “cream skimming” or the selective enrollment practices aimed at maintaining homogenous student bodies and the disparity between schools administered by educational management organizations (EMO’s)
versus small, local, non-profit groups (Peiser 1998; Lacireno-Paquet 2002). These are important issues that bring into focus the socio-economic and political dynamics of school reform within a highly stratified society. Under NCLB which was introduced in 2001, schools are required to make adequate annual yearly progress (AYP) in academic and non-academic areas or risk severe sanctions and possibly revocation of their charters (Fuller 2000; Noguera 2006). Like other urban areas, DC’s charter schools have struggled as a collective to fulfill the conditions of their charters and most are only showing small academic advantages over “traditional” schools.

However, the enterprise of charter education in Washington, DC shows no signs of slowing. The 2011-2012, school year saw the opening of three new charter schools in DC. The “free market” paradigm of public education has definitely been embraced by DC families where currently about 54% of public school students attend charters. School recruiters blanket grocery stores, neighborhoods, and community events in order to attract students to their educational programs. The prevalence of charter schools calls into question, the alternate reasons that parents choose these often “experimental” like educational options for their children. Some studies have suggested that poor and minority families are attracted to these schools smaller class sizes; young, and enthusiastic staff who are willing to dedicate extra hours to advance poor students; and the family-friendly demeanor that some charter schools possess which can be perceived as more welcoming and less intimidating than traditional schools. Ingenuity in meeting academic needs, as well as addressing unmet social and emotional needs of children and families have also been identified as contributing factors for the growing receptivity of charter schools (Schneider and Buckley 2005; Yancey 2000).

The quest for Black educational equity in the United States is an arduous narrative that continues to unfold. From the illegality of educating slaves, to the emergence of the Civil Rights
Freedom schools to the formation of independent African-centered schools, to segregation, integration, and de facto re-segregation, the promise of education as a means to economic freedom and social mobility remains elusive for many of the nation’s Black citizens (Anderson 1988; Kelley 2005; Watkins 1999). For decades, U.S. schools have been criticized for “failing” Black youth beyond the realm of grades and graduation rates.

CCS is a public charter school and as such, is open to any student of the District of Columbia. Charter schools have a degree of autonomy in matters of school administration and educational performance but still fall, to an extent, under the purview of the District of Columbia Public School system (DCPS), especially as it relates to accountability and standardized tests. Like many of the charter schools in Washington, D.C., and around the nation, CCS struggles to satisfy the academic conditions established in its charter and demonstrate that its students are making annual yearly progress (AYP) on the D.C.-CAS, the standardized test for D.C. public school students required under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The school met AYP during the 2008-2009 school year, but failed to do so in 2009-2010. Consequently, CCS had to adopt an Improvement Plan, the step that precedes school restructuring. The school was required to implement various instructional and administrative initiatives to address its areas of weakness. Tension was high during most of the 2010-2011 school year, as the school’s charter was up for renewal by the D.C. Charter School Board. Many teachers and staff were concerned about the school’s longevity. During my fieldwork external evaluators made frequent visits to CCS to assess the school’s progress. Teachers were under significant pressure to document student progress and to perform teaching-related, administrative tasks, posing even greater demands on valuable instructional time needed to work with their low performing students.

I agreed to assist with an after-school youth program at CCS and was granted access to the school’s email system. During the 2010-2011 school year, the executive director issued regular notices about evaluation visits...
accomplishment in achieving AYP in reading for the 2010-2011 school year, certainly worked in their favor, as the D.C. Charter School Board renewed the school’s for another five years. CCS must continue, however to address issues surrounding shortcomings in student testing performance.

Motivation for Research

This research examines some of the complexities surrounding Black identity, and as such, it is almost as much a personal endeavor as it is a scholarly work. Excerpts from my personal experience are illustrative of the broader context surrounding this research which entails issues of authenticity and belonging. I am a native Washingtonian, and was born during the summer of 1968, one of the most tumultuous years of the Civil Rights era. I grew up in D.C., and attended D.C. public schools. Mine was an uncontested Black world where I thought all Black experiences were like mine -- urban, working-class, somewhat dangerous, and overshadowed with a perpetual sense of wanting to “make it out.” A series of life events would eventually shatter my ideas about an essentialized and monolithic Black experience. The first “shattering” occurred while a student at Howard University, where I was exposed to the class, cultural, and ethnic diversity among Blacks.

A second “shattering” occurred after I transferred to the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), where I joined the Pan African student organization. There, I learned about colonization, oppression, and resistance and began to grapple more intimately with the human cost of racism, classism, and sexism. The South African anti-apartheid movement was in full force and thereby fueled my anti-racist, social justice fervor. A self-proclaimed Pan Africanist and revolutionary, I cut my chemically processed hair so I could start afresh with a natural Afro.

and many reminders to document their instructional efforts. Teachers expressed the burdensome nature of these administrative tasks and how it adversely affects their instructional time.
My study group members discussed the philosophies and works of Jomo Kenyatta, John Henrik Clarke, Marcus Garvey, Chancellor Williams, Frances Cress Welsing, Angela Davis, and C.L.R. James between classes and I began to learn just how much I had been “mis-educated” over the course of my schooling experience (Woodson 1933). Through the Pan African union, I learned of some of the pain, beauty, resiliency, and complexity in the African Diasporic experience. Yet, in retrospect, I realize that this “learning” had been framed in very normative, and “safe” ways.

The third and most significant “shattering,” was indeed transformative. After graduating from college in 1993, I spent six weeks in The Gambia, West Africa, the ancestral home of the late Alex Haley, author of the epic novel, Roots. It was significant in that it was my first trip beyond the borders of the United States, made more so by that fact that I was going “home” to Africa. In my mind, I was a distant daughter of Africa returning to her “roots.” It was there, while surrounded by people I would eventually consider family that my understanding of selflessness, ingenuity, community, and humility deepened. I realized though, while in the “Motherland” that I had romanticized and idealized Africa. The country’s economic dependency upon Europe and Asia was startling. Commodities that were central to Gambian life and culture, like rice and African wax-print fabric, were imported from China. Lebanese, French, Swedish, and British owed restaurants, nightclubs, bakeries, grocery stores, and other businesses. As I traveled throughout the country, working with youth groups in villages and towns, the poverty of the small nation became vividly clear. Gambian people were warm and inviting but simultaneously they were economically depressed and still under the weight of British colonization. The experience caused me to re-examine what it meant to call myself a Pan-African.
Just as I had romanticized Africa, Gambians had idealized America. While I was attempting to “be African” by proudly sporting my natural hair and dressing in lappas (African wrap skirts), and struggling to learn Wolof; my Gambian counterparts were chemically processing their hair, wearing wigs, bleaching their skin, and modeling jeans and imitation Nike sneakers. At times, I became acutely aware of my outsider status. Gambians seemed to know little about the web of oppression that Blacks faced in the U.S. To them, America was a land of promise and opportunity. I was challenged on my claims to an African identity in direct and rather confrontational ways, and also in subtle, indirect ways. My skin color, ancestry, and class status were called into question as evidence of my marginal belonging as an African. Some Gambians had little appreciation for my ancestral, political, and emotional claims to an African identity. Not everyone welcomed me as the returned daughter and sister. Some viewed me simply as an American; a wealthy outsider with no concrete connection to “The Continent.” Once or twice, I was even called a toubab (pronounced too-bob), a local term used to describe a White person or an outsider.

Back in the U.S., I extended my homeland experience by immersing myself in the cultural nationalist community in D.C., attending lectures and cultural events. Later I joined an African religious organization. I continue to explore, interrogate, and evolve in my identity as an African descended woman, mother, scholar, educator, activist, artist, and a spiritual being. My graduate training in anthropology has positioned me to understand racial/ethnic and gender identity as social constructions that are tightly wound up in the meanings people assign to certain behaviors, ideas, and ways of being. My real-life “African experience” afforded me an invaluable perspective on how I understood my racial and ethnic identity and inspired more that would later evolve into this basis of this research.
**Contribution of Research**

This research aims to make several contributions to the field of anthropology, particularly to the research on Diaspora as it is understood and experienced by African Americans in urban spaces (Baker 2000; Jackson 2005; Mullings 2000; Washington 2008). As anthropologists are concerned with how major trends are articulated through localized processes and dynamic, this research contributes to the literature concerned with the process by which African Americans come to identity with an African Diasporic identity (Gordon and Anderson 1999). As my research on African Diasporic identity occurs within the context of a charter school, my study also has relevance for education, particularly the dynamic exchange between state policies and localized understandings about identity and empowerment. There is a dearth of ethnographic data that nuances how African-centered schools operate as sites of site of African Diasporic identity construction (Henry 1998; Morris 2003). Greater inquiry is needed to understand how these particular learning environments, as communities, reify and challenge normative beliefs around race, gender, class, and Black identity. More research is also needed to help us understand how youth are processing issues of identity in African-centered settings. Though some studies have advanced the pedagogical merits of African-centered schools for African American students, they have insufficiently interrogated the underlying assumptions that inform the construction of Blackness and African identity within these spaces (Henry 1998; Murrell 1998; Pollard and Ajirotutu 1990; Weber 1993). Yet, this is particularly relevant for schools that claim an African-centered focus and wherein the concepts of race, ethnicity, and identity are so central to their mission and pedagogical practices. My research examines some of these dynamics within the context of a charter school and contributes to this scholarship.

Further, this research also exposes some of challenges and contradictions engendered by community-run charter schools within the climate of accountability and educational...
corporatization. This is critical, as the trend of charter schools is popular in Washington, D.C. and increasingly, many families are turning to this educational option for their children. Also, as urban areas like D.C. are rapidly changing around the country, becoming more racially and economically diverse, it is important to illuminate how communities of African Americans are responding to and anticipating these dynamics. This is even more imperative in this city, which has been historically significant for Black mobility, identity, and cultural expression.

Ethnographic accounts of Washington, D.C., although rare, infrequently focus on Black communities, and much less on how these communities are embodying and living ideologies of Black empowerment and African cultural expression. This study seeks to make such a contribution to the anthropological record by documenting the dynamic, vibrant, and varied African-centered communities in Washington, D.C. By focusing on these communities in the nation’s capital, this research seeks to reaffirm Washington, D.C. as a site for rigorous and compelling anthropological investigations, and subsequently, increase the presence of Washington, D.C. in the anthropological record.

Structure of Chapters

In addition to this Introduction, there are six chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 2 is the Literature Review, which I have constructed around two major issues. In Part I, I examine how scholars from various disciplines, have studied the African American connection to Africa through some of the major theoretical bodies of work including Pan Africanism, African Diaspora, Afrocentricity, and Black nationalism. I then present African-centered schools, as an outgrowth of the Black Nationalist movement, as a particular way in which people connect to and exhibit an African Diasporic identity. In Chapter 3, Context and Setting, I achieve a dual purpose. The aim of Part I is to situate Washington, D.C. as a deterritorialized site of African
identity construction as demonstrated through its various avenues of transnational interaction among and between people of the African Diaspora. In Part II, I establish CCS as a deterritorialized space within the deterritorialized site of D.C. In the latter part of the chapter, I focus more narrowly on the history of the school’s founding, school practices, student and staff composition that comprise this second tiered site of African identity. I detail in Chapter 4, the qualitative research tools I utilized to conduct my study. Since my presence as an African–American, dreadlocked woman who identifies with an African diasporic identity is known by key members at CCS, I include a discussion of my researcher positionality in this chapter. Chapter 5 includes data on the three major findings from my study which includes 1) the perceptions of the three constituents at CCS; Majority Educators (teachers and parents); Minority Educators (teachers and parents); and Neighborhood parents; 2) Student perception of the school as an African-centered space; and, 3) how the discourse of neoliberal education dominates the schooling environment and amplifies existing class and gender tensions within CCS. Lastly, I discuss in Chapter 6, the implications of this research for Diasporic studies, African-centered education, and urban ethnography.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropologists and other scholars have a long history of examining issues of identity. My study follows a trajectory of investigations concerned with how communities of African Americans understand themselves as connected to an African Diaspora, particularly within a school environment. In contributing to this body of knowledge, I have constructed this literature review around two major ideas: 1) How have African Americans expressed a consciousness about and a connection to Africa with the domains of scholarship, activism, and daily lived experience?; and, 2) How do schools operate as sites of identity construction and contestation?

The first section of this chapter explores the issue of Black identity through the theoretical lenses of early Pan Africanism/African Diaspora, Afrocentricity, and Black Nationalism. I end this section with a discussion on how African-Centered schools have, since the 1960’s, served as an example of African Diasporic identity construction. The second section of this chapter includes literature on the current educational climate and how schools shape students’ identities as learners, and as raced, classed, and gendered beings. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my conceptual framework and how my research advances the dialogue on African Americans and African Diasporic identity within the context of a deterritorialized space.

Part I - Theorizing Black Identity

Pan-Africanism & African Diaspora

One of the ways that Black identity has been discussed in the scholarly literature is through the discourse of Pan Africanism and Diaspora. I combine these two concepts because at their core they are related in that they subsume a connectedness among descendants of the Africans dispersed through the transatlantic slave trade. African Diaspora was prominently advanced by the Pan Africanist political movement of the mid-1950’s as a means of creating
solidarity and political consciousness among Blacks throughout the world (Shepperson 1993). The initial construction of the African Diaspora, as it was developed by early Pan African theorists\(^\text{15}\) was based upon “a phenotypically constructed and ascribed racial identity indicative of sub-Saharan African territorial origin” (Gordon and Anderson 1999). In the latter 20\(^{th}\) century, prominent scholars recognized the problematics of using race as an analytical category and focused on culture as the key element in the analysis of the Black world. African Diaspora was invoked as a transnational way of constructing Black identity based on race and common cultural practices, African survivals and worldviews thought to be present in the dispersed African world.

Contemporary critiques of the African Diasporic paradigm point to its tendency to negate mixed identities and the historical and cultural particularities that distinguish Africans within the Diaspora (Appiah 1998; Hall 1988). Such was the case for example, in Gordon and Anderson’s work on Creole Hondurans who, according to their oral histories of their past, did not claim an African ancestral origin.

Currently, Diaspora is a highly contested phenomenon. While much of the African presence throughout the Diaspora is due to the transatlantic slave trade, other global forces have prompted the dispersal of African people to various parts of the world, some even dating before the 16\(^{th}\) century slave trade. Scholars are still debating how best to define and thus conduct scholarship on the Diaspora. In contrast to early renderings of African Diaspora ideology, many scholars argue that we cannot speak of a singularized African Diaspora but of multiple diasporas that are particular to the locales where African descended people are located (Gilroy 1993; Hamilton 2007). Scholars examine the range of African presence in parts of the world, not

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\(^{15}\) William Blyden, Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and W.E.B. Dubois all commonly recognized as the progenitors of early Pan Africanist thought.
typically considered diasporic sites such as Russia (Thornton 2007), and Germany (Hamilton 2007).

A prominent question within African Diasporic studies concerns the proximity and centrality of Africa. Gomez (2006), centralizes the ubiquity of Africa in shaping the lived experience of people who identify as part of the diaspora, as well as those who do not. He notes that, “…the African presence and contribution is performed (emphasis Gomez), throughout the diaspora, every day, in countless ways, and by millions of people, African and non” (18). Gomez (2006) also warns of the dangers of being overly critical of “essentialism” and the tendency to label as essentialist, any connections between Africa and the people of the Diaspora. Gomez (2006) advances that we must acknowledge Africa’s role as the genesis of the multiple and varied expressions of Diasporic identity throughout the world. Okpewho (1999) also admonishes scholars’ abandonment of “Africa” in contemporary constructions of African Diaspora dialogue. He makes firm his stance with these words,

“Essentialism” has emerged in recent diaspora discourse as an ugly label for any tendency to see the imprint of the homeland or ancestral culture – in this case, Africa – in any aspect of the lifestyles or outlook of African-descended peoples in the western Atlantic world. But we can hardly deny that Africa has had much to do with the ways that New World Blacks have chosen to address the realities before them from the moment they emerged from the slave ships (1999:xv).

Skinner opposes the polarization of Africa within African diasporic studies. He asserts (1999) that in advancing the African Diaspora, we must, as the image of the Sankofa16 reminds us, look to the past and future simultaneously. While we cannot live in an “idealized African past,” (41) nor should we abandon Africa completely. Yet, laying claim to an African genesis is insufficient at helping us solve today’s issue facing the African Diaspora. Rather, as Skinner

16 The Sankofa Bird is an Akan symbol of bird whose body faces forward (the future) while her head, faces the back (the past). She is often depicted with an egg in her mouth and is the visual representation of the expression,” to know your future, you must know your past.”
argues, advancement is a fluid process that involves inspiration from the past combined with the conditions of today that inspire the ingenuity required for forward action. He reminds us of the power of human agency and the fluid nature of culture, as he offers prescriptive for forward movement,

I submit that the task of dealing with contemporary hegemonic paradigms should be less an exercise in *Afrocentricity* than an attempt to develop the capacity of *Africanity*. Paradigms, whether developed by African peoples or others, provide a way of looking at the world in which people live, and a manner of providing succeeding generations ways in which to shape and to understand their lives. Given our reality and our existential needs, it is necessary that we delve into the African past and our own existence for ideas and processes for paradigms to effect our renaissance (Skinner 1999:39).

Through the adoption and re-articulation of rituals, practices, and institutions that consider both the conditions of the past and the present, as Skinner says, we are able to fashion a new way of living as Africans in the new world. In this regard, the African inspired but uniquely African American designed holiday of Kwanza, according to Skinner, stands as a vivid and enduring example of how we are to be innovative in creating paradigms that mobilize people for action.

Scholars are even at odds with what terminology to use in referring to the dispersed African population around the globe. Gilroy’s (1993) conceptualization of Black Atlantic New World African identity is one that does not ground belonging in Africa as a site of cultural origin. Rather, he argues that what links peoples of the Diaspora is their shared low social positioning. As such, the thread that connects people of the African Diaspora is not African racial identity or cultural practices thought to transcend the diasporic world but their collective responses to oppression. Gordon and Anderson (1999) believe that Gilroy’s conception offers a hopeful perspective in moving identity studies forward and circumventing the essentialist problematics of

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17 Kwanzaa has grown to vast appeal, and is now celebrated by African descended people around the world. December 2012, will mark the 45th anniversary of the cultural holiday.
diaspora. To that end, Gordon and Anderson advocate an “ethnography of the diaspora” which they define as “ethnographic investigations of identification processes among diverse Black peoples and how individuals and groups conceive of and participate in diasporic community or identity (1999:288). By examining the ways in which African Americans understand themselves as connected to an African Diaspora, within the context of an African-centered school in D.C., I hope to contribute to this body of literature.

Afrocentricity

Although Afrocentricity is a term coined by Dr. Molefi Asante, Chair of Temple University’s African Studies Department, more than 25 years ago, the concept has its ideological roots in earlier movements. Asante acknowledges the long line of activists and intellectual precursors to the theory of Afrocentricity (2001:195). Since the 1990’s, Afrocentricity, has been a controversial, and at times ambiguous, concept with numerous iterations across disciplines. Gayles (2008) points out that over the course of his career, Asante himself has offered numerous renderings of the concept. In one of his earlier works, The Afrocentric Idea, Asante defines Afrocentricity as,

A frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. It centers on placing people of African origin in control of their lives and attitudes about the world. This means that we examine every aspect of the dislocation of African people: culture, economics, psychology, health, and religion, as an intellectual theory. As an intellectual theory, Afrocentricity is the study of the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as key players rather than victims [of history] (1991:172).

Here, as Asante asserts, Afrocentricity, requires that people of African descent view the world, their scholarship and their intellectual engagement through the lens of an African identity. Thus, Afrocentricity is not only a matter of focusing on the African world, but also entails a way of viewing the world; it is both content and process that is centered in a conception of a core African reality and a core African experience. Asante, often a controversial figure himself, has
published extensively on the subject of Afrocentricity and has been cited by hundreds of scholars. As the founder of the country’s first doctoral program in African American studies at Temple University, a growing body of scholarship has been produced, from a variety of disciplines, using Asante’s Afrocentric methodologies.

As with any notable body of scholarship, there are dissenting voices, scholars who have pointed out the weaknesses of the theoretical merit of Afrocentricity. I will not attempt to reiterate these counter positions in totality here, but will briefly provide a review what scholars have identified as the major shortcomings of Asante’s Afrocentricity. Gayles (2008) identifies the tendency for Afrocentricity to promote essentialist notions of the Black experience, discounting the “ongoing fluidity of Black life” (153). Gayles further elucidates how experiences of Black gays, Black Christians, and Black conservatives exist on the periphery of Afrocentricity because they are not deemed, according to Asante’s conception of the term, as examples or reflections of authentic African culture. Similarly, Ransby (2000) strongly critiques of Afrocentricity for reifying sex roles and gender marginality.

Kweku Anthony Appiah (1998) argues against Afrocentricity as a valid approach to unifying Africans throughout the Diaspora because it is founded upon an unstable notion of race and African selfhood as a scientific construct, even though scientists have refuted biological explanations of race. Appiah argues that “African unity, African identity need securer foundations than race” (1998:116). Pertaining to Afrocentric (or African-centered) education, Appiah contends that Black children should not receive a fundamentally different education than other children but that all children, White and Black, need to be ensured a quality education.

One of the more extensive anthropological discussions on the limitations of Afrocentricity is offered by Leith Mullings (2000), who interrogates Afrocentric theorists’
treatment of culture in static and bounded ways. Irrespective of the many interpretations and iterations of Afrocentricity, she urges scholars not to dismiss the primacy of culture as an expression of the human agency and resiliency of African descendant in their attempts to counter Eurocentric supremacist paradigms.

She cautions that as Afrocentricity is a project of negation, negating the ways in which Eurocentric domination has controlled the interpretation of history, it “sometimes loses its cultural compass, straying from the land of our collective memories, contemporary struggle and hopes for the future (2000: 212). Her distinction of culture is one that is widely appreciated within the discipline of anthropology and speaks to evolving, malleable nature of the human experience. She offers that,

Culture is not a fixed set of traits, values, or behaviors, nor is it transmitted unchanged from generation to generation, nor is it merely a set of principles...Cultures are historically created and therefore not hermetically sealed. The contemporary world in which information moves around the globe at nearly the speed of light brings new possibilities for domination, but also fresh potential for liberation. Diasporic cultures, for example, are continually formed and reformed through constant interaction and exchange (213).

She offers in contrast, the grounding and solidifying role of culture in her essay, Reclaiming Culture: the Dialectics of Identity.

A sense of culture and history situates the individual in time and space, plotting the places occupied by ancestors gone before and descendants yet to come. Culture provides a framework through which communities interpret their past, understand their present, and image their future (2000:211).

Mullings is addressing here the tendency for Afrocentric scholars to singularly focus their efforts on the rewriting of history through the lens of Afrocentricity. In this vein, much attention has been focused on the reclamation of Africa’s antiquity and contribution to world civilization. While Mullings is not refuting the importance of re-interpreting history she invites us to remain cognizant of the contemporary struggle of Blacks in the Diaspora. In recognizing the
interdependent nature of history, culture, and struggle, she argues, we counter hegemony in the ivory tower and in the “savagely unequal economic and political relations” (2000:212) that impact the lives of African Americans result in elevated unemployment, health disparities, mass incarceration of African American males (Alexander 2010), homelessness, and poverty.

Afrocentricity Beyond the Academy

Ama Mazama (2001), editor of *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, offers a more nuanced rendering of Afrocentricity which I find more useful for my research. Noting the theoretical confusion that continues to exist within academia and the community despite the term’s over twenty-five year history, Mazama advances that Afrocentricity is best understood as a paradigm. Borrowing from linguist Thomas Kuhn’s definition, Mazama states that the principal aim of a paradigm is “to make explicit the existence of premises upon which all intellectual inquiries are necessarily based” (1962:121). The two central aspects of a paradigm, as noted by Kuhn are that it must have a cognitive and a structural aspect. Yet, Mazama also argues for a third aspect of an Afrocentric paradigm which is a functional aspect. The functional aspect of Afrocentricity, as expressed by Mazama, must “prove able to activate our consciousness; to open our heart in such a way that membership in the Eurocentric plantation and its accompanying process of dehumanization is no longer an option” (2003:31). The functional aspect of Afrocentricity, she asserts, can be seen as impacting the lives of Black people in three ways: 1) in the exhibition of cultural phenomena like dance and music; 2) in the emergence of new political discourse and praxis in Africa; and, 3) in the establishment of institutions, schools, and spiritual centers in Africa and in the diaspora (2003:13).

Mazama’s interpretation of Afrocentricity is useful for my dissertation research because it allows a linkage between Asante’s intellectual and scholarly conception of the term and the
way in which I see and experience Afrocentricity being “used” in Washington, D.C. African-centered communities. It is the functional aspect of this ideology, and the belief in its potential to transform the lived experience of Black people, that justifies the formation of schools like CCS, the site of my research, and similar institutions.

Afrocentricity and the Afrocentric Era

Afrocentricity has become a dominant way of discussing Black identity in late 20th century America (Austin 2006, Baker 2000, Mullings 2000). Austin argues that the late 1980’s and 90’s left African Americans feeling pessimistic about their prospects in American society (2006:130). This in turn, he argues, fueled their fervent embrace of what they perceived as the restorative promise of Afrocentricity. Some of the manifestations of the Afrocentric influence included the resurgence of scholarship on the African origins of civilization and their subsequent contributions to world, including Greek and Roman history; the introduction of Afrocentric curriculum into public schools and supplementary programs to address the academic failure and low self-esteem of Black children, particularly Black boys; the publication of popular books, magazines that promoted Afrocentric lifestyles (home décor, weddings, baby naming ceremonies); and the adoption of African inspired forms of dress, rituals, celebrations, and social practices such as Kente cloth and Kwanzaa (Austin 2006).

Kente cloth is a traditional woven cloth worn by the Akan people of Ghana. In vintage photos of former Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, can be seen adorning the beautiful multi-colored fabric. The patterns of the fabric convey social status among royal families, with each family possessing a pattern particular to their clan. Yet, during the Afrocentric era, Kente cloth came to be a marker of an African descended identity. It was a way for African Americans to publicly symbolize some level of connection to and identification with Africa. African
American preachers, church choirs, and college graduates used the brilliantly colored swatches of fabric to adorn their robes. Black Pan-Hellenic organizations, like Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Phi Alpha, also used Kente cloth patterns inclusive of the Greek letters, as an assertion of an identity connected to Africa.

Like Kente cloth, Kwanzaa also became identified as a marker of African identity. Kwanzaa is the seven-day cultural celebration of created by Black Nationalist Malauna Karenga, in 1966. Although members of African-centered communities throughout the U.S. had embraced Kwanzaa since its inception, the holiday gained broader appeal when it became engulfed in the Afrocentric era and more so when corporations appropriated it for profit. Erin Evans, writer and editor for the online magazine centered around Black life and culture, The Roots, writes about it, in her article, The Trouble With Kwanzaa,

But by the '90s, Kwanzaa had fallen prey to commercialism and all the good and bad that comes with it. Multiculturalism in mainstream institutions helped increase the visibility and awareness of Kwanzaa. But then came the Kwanzaa kitsch. McDonald's had a Kwanzaa commercial. Hallmark's Mahogany line had greeting cards. Kmart and Wal-Mart started selling Kwanzaa gifts, cards and wrapping paper. The Kwanzaa stamp came along in 1997. There were Kwanzaa celebration pop-up books. Cartoon shows on Disney and Nickelodeon had their obligatory Kwanzaa episode, where the black character has to explain to the white ones what this seven-day ceremony is all about.

Although the commercialization of Kwanzaa has likely popularized the holiday for more African Americans, the insertion of mainstream culture, for some, compromises its power as an affirmation of identity borne of an ideology of Black resistance. Evans further reflects on her family’s embrace of the holiday,

Looking back on it, wearing Kente cloth and knowing words in Swahili didn't make me any more authentically African than I already am. For me, it all amounted to a superficial connection to Africa that, in its thinness, ultimately degraded the depth of black culture and our ancestry.

A number of salient issues are encapsulated in Evans’s comment. Intrinsic to discussions of authenticity are the issues of heterogeneity and multi-vocality of experience and legitimation of
identity. Evans’s perspective reflects a sentiment that is rarely expressed in the literature on Black identity; which is that some Blacks do not aspire to legitimize their Blackness through Africa including the adoption of African-inspired practices such as Kwanzaa, African name adoption, or the conversion to an African religion. Though not representative of Evans’s stance, some Blacks find no currency in identifying as African, they recognize no connection to an African past or ancestry. Evans’s comment further illustrates how people feel unauthorized in the experience of their own identity, an inherent problem that derives when one narrative of identity is advanced over other expressions of self (Jackson 2005).

Feminist scholar Cresida Heyes (2002:3) discusses the disjuncture and challenges borne of identity politics. At its core, Heyes asserts that identity politics “rests on unifying claims about the meaning of politically laden experiences to diverse individuals” (2002:3). However, a political perspective grounded in identity is inherently problematic, as it seeks to mobilize people with diverse and multiple identities, which can never be encapsulated in a singular interpretation of experience. Heyes explains the exclusionary effects of identity politics here,

Just as dominant groups in the culture at large insisted that the marginalized integrate by assimilating to dominant norms, so within some practices of identity politics dominant sub-groups may, in theory and practice, impose their vision of the group’s identity onto all its members (Heyes 2002:4). The resultant disjuncture invariably occurs because it forces people to negate the multiple identities they embody thereby, forcing individuals to prioritize one part of their identity over another. In many instances, the acceptance of an identity-borne political perspective requires the silencing or erasure of other, possibly competing identities. Such is the case with tenuous status of Black gays in the Black church or in the Afrocentric community. Black feminist scholars (Collins 1989; Davis 1981; hooks 2000; Ransby 2000) for example, have vocalized the reality of the interlocking web of oppression that women must navigate, noting that when injustice is
enacted upon the Black female individual it impacts all aspects of her experience. Efforts that require people to mobilize on the basis of race or gender or class or sexual orientation or a particular interpretation of ethnicity are problematic because they ignore the interconnected nature of existence. Heyes also highlights how allegiance to political ideologies based on narrow constructs of identity prevent political dialogue and coalition building (2002:4). Identity politics, then, presents a troubling conundrum because it drowns out other interpretations of experience.

Black Nationalism

Numerous scholars have elucidated the history of the Black Power era and the subsequent Black Nationalist movement that emerged during the time period of the mid- 1960’s (Austin 2006; Carson 1981; Gordon 2003; Marable 1991). I will not attempt to present such a vast and complex history here, but will provide a brief overview of some of the major concepts, as they are foundational to the creation of African-centered schools. Due to the overlapping history and the great variation in how scholars define the terms, it is difficult to identify exactly when the Civil Rights era ended and the Black Power era began. Historians rely largely upon their own interpretations of the past as indicators of shifts in Black political movements rather than concrete events that globally signify the onset of a “new” political ideology or strategy. Efforts to present a single history of any social movement obscure the diversity within the movement (Austin 2006). The Black Power movement reflected a multiplicity of perspectives and strategies about Black advancement which included Black Nationalism ¹⁸ (militant and non- militant perspectives) and Pan Africanism. Austin (2006) distinguishes between what he calls “cultural nationalists” who prioritized promoting racial pride through the adoption of the arts, African

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¹⁸ Austin also argues that Black Nationalism in twentieth-century America is a term that is applied to a wide range of phenomena ranging from “nation building to ethnic politics to cultural nationalism to public opinion” (2006:22).
names, fashions, and select cultural practices such as Malauna Karenga’s US Organization, from the “cultural” black nationalists, who were concerned about the “political and economic racial structures that affected Black life” (2006:109). For the “cultural’ Black nationalists, power, not performance was essential. Therefore, politics reached beyond dressing in dashikis and wearing afros and necessarily encompassed nation building and securing independent arts and cultural institutions, schools, businesses, and political organizations that supported Black liberation (109).

Austin (2006) further asserts that a major difficulty in chronicling the start of the Black Power Movement is because “by 1970, many Black Power activists began defining themselves as Pan Africanists” (85). He further points out that activists at the 1970 Conference of African Peoples, clarified that Pan Africanists ideologies were not at odds with Black Power, but rather, Pan Africanism was “the extension of Black Power to address Blacks globally” (2006:85). For my purposes here, I assert that the Black Power Movement represented a shift in Black political strategy that focused less on the integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement and more on the aims of racial separation and Black self-determination that occurred in the mid 1960’s. As African countries were demanding liberation from European domination, so too were many Blacks exerting an ideological shift that centered on Black liberation and self-determination. Due to persistent racism and political and economic injustice in various aspects of public life, some Blacks began adopting an ideology of Black activism grounded in the acceptance of African political and racial identity. Although the concept of Pan Africanism had been part of Black political discourse since the Pan African Congress of 1900, the version of Pan African ideology of the late mid-twentieth century was popularized by Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, and
the charismatic Jamaican born Black leader, Marcus Garvey, and was widely embraced by Blacks across America.

African-Centered Schools: An Example of African Diasporic Identity

During the height of the Black power movement of the mid 1960’s, Black activists created independent schools to advance an ideology of Black liberation and Pan Africanism. In urban centers throughout the U.S., community members, parents, and educators founded independent Black schools as a way of resisting the Eurocentric educational model that dominated public schools which inadequately portrayed the history of Africans and also disempowered Black students by teaching them to subscribe to existing structures and ideologies of White supremacy (Akoto 1994; Hilliard 1978, 1992; Lomotey 1992; Muhammad 1992; Sefa Dei 1994; Shujaa 1997). These schools were also heavily influenced by the philosophy of Pan Africanism of the mid-20th century, popularized by Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana, and Malcolm X. These schools are sometimes referred to in the literature as Pan African or African-centered schools because Pan Africanist ideology, the belief that all African people are one, was a centralizing theme for identity formation, school pedagogy, and political and economic mobilization. As such, I examine African-centered schools in this chapter, as an example of how some African Americans express an African Diasporic identity. By establishing their own institutions of learning, Black activists aspired to counter oppression, control their own destiny, and fortify Black youth with cultural and political knowledge to advance Black liberation. These schools, which were autonomous and solely supported by the Black community through tuition and donations, advanced a clear Black Nationalist agenda that stressed Black self-determination, African cultural reclamation, and academic excellence. Grounded in the Diasporic history and culture of African people, these Black-controlled school
environments aimed to enable Black students to feel more connected to, represented in, and empowered by the educational process. Independent schools were private tuition based schools that were primarily supported by communities of Black activists that subscribed to revolutionary political ideologies. In his research on African-centered schools, urban education scholar, G. Kmt Shockley (2007), identifies the purpose of such institutions as being “to equip Black children with self-knowledge for the purpose of instilling in them a sense of agency for the purpose of nation-building” (104). Thus, these schools had an overtly political aim.

Parents and activists established schools in Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois, East Palo Alto, California; Washington D.C.; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Trenton, New Jersey (Henry 1998; Hoover 1994; Lee 1994, Lomotey 1994; Shujaa 1994). Many schools were developed out of the frustration of Black parents who had become dismayed by the public school’s failure to educate their children. Such was the case with Gertrude Wilks who founded the Nairobi School in East Palo Alto, California, in 1966 after realizing that her son not being taught how to read at the public school he attended. The Nairobi School opened with an unprecedented 200 students (Hoover 1992) and later evolved into Nairobi College.

Nairobi College was the site where the California Association for Afro-American Education Conference was held in 1970, where activists began to establish the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI). The meeting was attended by established Black Power activists from over twenty privately operated independent schools (Austin 2006). The activists formed CIBI with the hopes of it serving as a national governing body for independent Black schools. CIBI was officially founded in 1972, and still exists today as national and international accrediting body for independent African-centered schools. It is important to note however, that not all independent institutions have membership in CIBI.
African-centered schools differ from regular Eurocentric public schools in notable ways, the most crucial factor being that the mission and philosophy upon which such schools are based. As an expression of liberationist pedagogy that seek to advance the condition of the African American community by utilizing culture as an essential component of instruction, identification, and political mobilization. African history and elements of select African ethnic group cultural practices were infused into the school environment and pedagogical styles. Some of the practical features of these schools include the organization of students into of “multi-grade” classes; the adoption of school uniforms reflective of customs of African dress; the use of African languages like Swahili and Yoruba in instruction and daily communication; the creation of a cooperative and family-centered learning environment; the development of a critical consciousness; and the practice of interrogating relationships of power and inequality (Lee 1992). In terms of instruction, there is great variance in how African history, culture, language and music are used in the teaching of math, science, reading, and other subjects. Using the Egyptian pyramids, required reading for higher grades may be works by writers of the African Diaspora, students may sing the Negro National Anthem daily or recite a pledge of commitment to the tenets of African liberation are some of the ways in which curriculum differs from that of public school.

The dissipation of the Black Power Movement, along with increased public school enrollment, and the downward trend of employment and affordable housing in many of the cities where Blacks predominated in the late 1960’s and early 70’s led to the subsequent under enrollment and eventual dissolution of some of the independent schools. Because independent schools did not accept federal or state dollars, and were operated by families of activists, some could not sustain themselves based on the tuition and private donations they received from their surrounding Black communities (Hoover 1992; Kifano 1996). However many schools remain in
existence today in San Antonio, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; Richmond, Virginia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and in Washington, D.C., some having been established by a new generation of Black nationalists\(^{19}\). Such schools are supported by communities of activists and African Americans who claim an African-centered identity, or at least identify with the approaches of such schools. These educators, scholars, and activists, look to African-centered education as an antidote to the injustices and inadequacies of traditional public education and as a vehicle through which the social, emotional as well as educational needs of African American students can be appropriately addressed. As an alternative, African-centered education is viewed as a way of restoring power, agency, and historical accuracy to the experience and mission of education for Black students.

Since the Afrocentric era of the 1980’s, African-centered\(^{20}\) approaches have extended beyond independent schools and have been applied to various educational contexts including child development programs (Hale-Benson 1986), youth programs (Kunjufuu 1998; Warfield-Coppock 1992), public schools (Delpit 1992; Henry 1998), and a range of settings (Asante 1991; Boykin 1983; Warfield-Coppock (1992) examines rites of passage programs for African American youth modeled after similar youth socialization processes practiced by various African ethnic groups. Such programs offer young men and women structured, transitional experiences that prepare them to assume adult roles in the family. Warfield-Coppock endorses rites experiences as particularly useful for African American youth whose families are unstable and thus, unable to provide youth the support and nurturing they need to transition responsibly into

\(^{19}\) I attended the bi-annual CIBI conference in Atlanta, Georgia on 2007, where much discussion ensued around a rather newly established CIBI school in Trenton, N.J. Thus, the Independent school movement remains active.

\(^{20}\) The terms Afrocentric, African-centered, and Africentric are used to refer to a very similar educational phenomenon. For the sake of clarity, I will use African-centered education to refer to schooling environments built upon African descended identity, history, and culture.
adulthood. Weber (2001), questions the impact of African-centered educational approaches for African American males. During the early 1990’s, the proliferation of African-centered educational initiatives was inspired by a belief the low self-esteem among African American males and lack of adult role models was the reason for their persistent under-achievement in schools. Despite noted psychologist’s refutation of this notion low-self esteem among Black children (Cross 1985), many such initiatives were implemented to positively socialize African American males during 1980’s and 1990’s. Shockley (2007) focuses on the Afrocentric educator within schools as a means to elevate African-centered pedagogy as a viable alternative for African American public school children. Annette Henry’s (1998) research examines how Black girls negotiate sex and gender politics in African-centered school in Chicago, Illinois; showing that how, in the presence of boys, Black girls were passive and invisible. Yet among their own, they were willful and “womanish” girls who sought to change their social environment (1998:151). She argues for the allocation of space where girls can “speak and write from their own subjectivities” (166). Henry invites Black feminists and womanists into these environments to help girls navigate the sometimes hostile and silencing waters within Black Nationalist, African-centered schools.

African-centered educational approaches have also extended beyond the United States. George Sefa Dei (1994), is a Ghanaian born educational anthropologist based in Canada, and an ardent proponent of African-centered schooling for Black Canadian youth. Dei discusses the liberatory potential of Afrocentric pedagogy within a non-U.S. context, where Black students are the racial minority in White majority schools, unlike the U.S. communities where African-centered education is commonly practiced. Dei’s conception of Afrocentricity rests upon the investigation and understanding of phenomena from a perspective grounded in African-centered values. It is about the validation of African experiences and histories, as
well as a critique of the continued exclusion and marginalization of African knowledge systems from educational texts, mainstream academic knowledge, and scholarship” (1994:5).

Dei characterizes Afrocentric education as a form of critical pedagogy (Apple 1990; Friere 1990; Giroux 1992; Gordon 1992; McLaren 1989), whose aim is to “equip students and teachers with the requisite cultural capital to work toward the eradication of the structural conditions that marginalize the existence of certain segments of the school population” (1994:17). In promoting Afrocentricity in Canadian schools, Dei (1994) focuses on the adoption and perpetuation of cultural values found common among many African cultures prior to European domination. Some of these traits include gerontocracy, respect for nature, communalism, shared wealth, and inclusiveness. Though he acknowledges the diversity among the peoples of Africa, Dei asserts that there are more cultural commonalities among the peoples of Africa than differences. He argues advances Afrocentricity as an “alternative, non-exclusionary, and nonhegemonic system of knowledge informed by African peoples’ histories and experiences” (1994:4). Yet, I caution against the tendency to view African-centered spaces and African-centered educators as educators as divorced from the systems of oppression within which they exist and sometimes perpetuate. Even in predominantly Black, and African-centered spaces, hegemonic norms around gender, race, and class, are in full operation. It is the duty of critical educators and scholars to unpack the layers of contestation that exist in these environments.

As I have demonstrated here, most research conducted within African-centered learning environments focus on pedagogy within these spaces. Few studies approach these environments from the position of examining how Black identity, specifically African Diasporic identity, is negotiated and contested within these spaces (Morris 2003). Nor do many studies in African-centered learning environments examine the attitudes that educators, parents, and students have
towards about these approaches and these constituents’ connections to other forms of African Diasporic identity expression. As schools do much more than teach reading and writing, examinations of how schools shape students’ varied identities is imperative. I turn to this literature in Part II and also discuss how today’s competitive educational climate has impacted this aspect of schooling.

**Part II – Schools and Identity**

The second part of this literature review is structured around literature that situates schools as a sites of multiple and contested identity construction. Although this is dissertation is not a traditional school ethnography, in examining African–centered identity within a school space, it is useful to briefly examine, through the scholarly literature, how school impacts the process of identity construction for its various constituents.

Every day, in classrooms across America, teachers convey ideas about race and ethnicity (Fine 1992; Pollock 2004, Tate 1997; Washington 2008), achievement (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2006; Mehan and Hubbard 1994; Oaks 2005; Ogbu 1987), gender (Fordham 1994; Goldstein 2009; Henry 1998), and sexuality (Herr 2004) in their discourse. Schools, as cultural institutions, transmit to students the beliefs, customs, and practices that are normative within a given society (Spindler 1990). In this regard, schools play a powerful role in shaping students’ multiple social identities (Pollock 2004; Goldstein 2009). School culture is manifested through school curriculum, student and teacher interaction, including, who is heard and “silenced” in classrooms; pedagogical styles, school leadership, and the underlying ideology about the role of education in U.S. society. These factors collude and disadvantage certain groups within schools, particularly those who have been historically marginalized within society. Peter McLaren,
(2007), a proponent of critical pedagogy, shares his awakening to this disturbing reality of the U.S. and Canadian educational systems,

I was soon struck by the range of sociological theories that explained how schools can do disempower, delegitimate, and disconfirm the lives of disadvantaged students. I discovered as well that schools operate through a “hidden curriculum” that incarcerates students in the “semiotics of power” and works against the success of racial minorities, women, and the poor. Yet I was also made aware of how schools could work in emancipatory ways to empower students to accomplish, in the words of Paulo Freire, “the reading the word and reading the world.” (2007:xix)

Anthropological studies of schools have contributed much to the understanding of the social and political processes that occur in classrooms (Fordham 1996; Ogbu 1974; Rist 1974; Roberts 1976; Spindler 1974, 1990). Critical analyses of American classrooms have shown that schools largely mirror the norms, values, and hierarchical power structures of the broader society (Apple 1996, Anyon 2006; Giroux 2001; McLaren 1989). As such, they often replicate the race, class, ability, and gender inequalities found in the U.S. society (Darling-Hammond 2004; Fine 1991; Kozol 1991, 2005; Sadker 1995; Willis 1977). Subsequently, these studies have made evident the hegemonic nature of public schools and the resultant cultural contestations that often manifest among poor, and minority students and families.

Minority communities have responded to the challenges of hegemonic public schools in innovative ways, creating alternative educational institutions that reflect the political nature of education and seek to offer an empowering alternative. The African-centered Independent school movement set a precedent as one of the first movements among a minority group in the U.S. to establish an alternative education system through CIBI. The American Indian Tribally Controlled Education Movement of the late 1980’s sought to establish educational institutions that reflected Native American epistemologies, language, and cultural values thus resulting in an educational system that was affirming, empowering, and truly reflective of the community it served (Lipka 1991; Manuelito 2005; McCarty 2002). Religious minority groups, Muslims, and Jews have also
exercised self-determination in controlling the education of their children and youth as a means of insuring the spiritual, ideological, and cultural continuity of their social groups. In spite of these initiatives of community empowerment, the U.S. education system still struggles with providing quality education the country’s diverse student population.

Education is an inherently political act and African-centered pedagogy is a political stance. Sociolinguists have noted the critical position that language occupies in the production and transmission of knowledge, particularly but certainly not exclusively, for language minorities and cultural groups that have been historically marginalized in the United States (Leap 1993; McLaughlin 1989). Such researchers have also elucidated how Native American cultural groups’ choices about the use of Standard English and indigenous versus ancestral codes are factors of political and power dynamics (Leap 1993). The much publicized 1996 Oakland, California case brought the Ebonics issue into sharper focus when the school board unanimously voted to use African American English Vernacular (AAEV or Ebonics) as a scaffold for instructing Black students in Standard English. The decision drew national attention to the heavily contested debate around the legitimacy and utility of Black English and its place in the formal learning environment. The 1979, King vs. Ann Arbor, Michigan case, provided the historical precedent for the Oakland case, highlighting how teacher bias and cultural insensitivity can produce pernicious effects on Black children’s acquisition of Standard English skills and overall achievement (Smitherman 2002). As Geneva Smitherman notes, “language plays a dominant role in the social construction of reality” (2002:8). As such, it is a primal issue to consider in how members of a given culture or group create and experience their reality. Beyond classroom instruction, language is also implicated in the selection and/or creation of curriculum, school policies and practices, and worldview of teachers and administrators. While scholars
have devoted much attention to language in the schooling environment of minority, I argue that more attention be given to how groups within a school environment, especially one that is founded upon ideas of racial identity and cultural solidarity, experience that identity. This research would afford us a more realistic image of these spaces and expose the range of tension and contestation therein.

School Reform, Charter Schools, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

As part of the school reform movement, public charter schools (PCS) were created to provide school choice in light of the dreadful performance of the nation’s public educational system over the last three decades. The first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992. At the start of the 2009-2010 academic year, over 400 new public charter schools were planned to open across the country to more than 170,000 new students. Today there are approximately 4,900 public charter schools in 39 states and the District of Columbia that enroll 1.5 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2009).

PCSs are independent public institutions that are publicly funded, tuition free, non-sectarian schools that possess a relative degree of autonomy over traditional public schools; an aspect of charters that advocates find appealing. Though the charter school movement has grown exponentially over the almost two decades of their existence, debates still abound over their ethics, equity, and effectiveness. Some argue that PCS advance neoliberalism because they invoke a market based approach to improving schools which critics say, is ultimately, a means of privatizing public education (Apple 2006, McLaren 1989, Ravitch 2011). Critics have also suggested that PCS only perpetuate society’s existent class and racial inequalities, in even more acute ways than do traditional schools. Reflective of national trends in housing and neighborhood composition, many of the nation’s PCS lack race and class diversity in their
student bodies and many seem to cater to primarily low-income, Black, Latino, and Native American communities (Civil Rights Project 2003, Corwin & Schneider 2005; Garcia 2008). Critics have also raised concern over monitoring and compliance of charters, as their autonomy makes them more vulnerable to mismanagement and may place already disadvantaged students at even greater risk in poor performing schools (Education Week 2004).

Education today occurs against the backdrop of harsh class inequalities and within a climate dictated by competition and accountability. With the ongoing debates around the ethics and performance of charter schools, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has only heightened existing tensions within the domain of American public education. The NCLB Act of 2001, is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA) of 1965. NCLB was proposed in 2001, and adopted by Congress in 2002. It is, arguably, one of the most contentious pieces of federal education legislation to be passed in recent history. Typically, ESEA is reauthorized every five years; however reauthorization has been stalled in Congress since 2006. Thus, until recently, NCLB has never been reauthorized or amended, despite its many flaws which have been widely publicized in the popular media. With the goal of ensuring that all public school students are proficient in reading and math, by 2014, NCLB encompasses a strong focus on school accountability, standardized test scores, teacher qualifications, and other areas thought to hold states and individual schools to higher standards of educational performance. One of the most debated and problematic components of NCLB have been the annual mandated testing requirement for students. Under this law, traditional and public charter school students in grades 1 through 12, are assessed annually in math and reading. Schools maintain individual records of student performance, yet if schools, as a whole, fail to make adequate testing gains,
called annual yearly progress, (AYP), they face severe sanctions such as probation, administrative restructuring, and eventually, school closure.

Many scholars argue that NCLB has exacerbated minority student performance and has promoted underperformance of schools by school failure and placed even more pressure on already strapped and poorly performing schools (Anyon 2005; Hursh 2003; Ravitch 20011). These scholars have criticized NCLB’s narrow focus and limited criteria for measuring school success. By emphasizing standardized test scores as a major determinant of a school’s success, scholars argue that, NCLB has forced schools to teach to the test and adopt narrowly focused instructional programs that forsake art, music, and other programs, in order to test preparation and basic skills. This promotes a competitive dynamic within the American public education system that inherently disadvantages poor and minority students in already failing school systems. Critics of NCLB further criticize it as being an educational legislation that is narrow and short sighted because it considers the social factors that attribute to poor school performance, which are borne from broader structural inequalities.

Flaws in the No Child Left Behind Act have made it difficult for states to meet AYP. The law is fraught with strict provisions governing school performance, that many, even ones in affluent neighborhoods, which typically score well, were unable to meet their accountability goals. If a school fails to make adequate yearly progress in reading and math for two consecutive years, it is designated as a school in need of improvement. Schools must then notify parents of their status and provide students with supplemental educational services. The excerpt below, taken from the NCLB law, demonstrates is far reaching hand and its level of authority:

As with other public schools, charter schools that are unable to make AYP by the end of the second full school year after identification are placed under corrective action according to Section 1116(b)(7)(C) of ESEA. NCLB gives the appropriate entity under state law (see A-2) the responsibility to reorganize a charter school’s management or take
other corrective actions, consistent with State charter law and the State’s accountability plan for its charter schools. State charter law would determine if this requires the charter school to modify its charter contract21.

As a corrective measure, in September 2011, with ESEA/NCLB still having not been reauthorized by Congress, President Barack Obama and Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, announced voluntary ESEA Flexibility. Under ESEA flexibility, states, districts, and jurisdictions can apply for release from certain provisions of NCLB, provided that they develop accountability plans to which they are legally bound. States overwhelmingly responded to the opportunity to be released from the restrictiveness of NCLB. As of September 6, 2012, thirty-six states, including The District of Columbia, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs requested waivers from the conditions of No Child Left Behind Act, including 11 states that have already been authorized.

Framework

Lee Baker (2004) acknowledges the complexity endemic to explorations of identity and the tendency for social scientists to “reify” notions of homogeneity, hierarchy, and essentialism” (2004:3). To ward against this, Baker suggests that social scientists adopt a different perspective with which they view identity, seeing it as practice rather than a category of analysis (2010:3).

Analytical leverage is actually increased by viewing identity as a rather sloppy category of practice, opposed to the cleaner category of analysis because the use of practical categories can easily incorporate the fluidity involved in the way social and power relations shape identity and vice versa (2004:3).

Baker’s approach is grounded in the understanding of identity as being constitutive of the social practices in which people are engaged in. As such, is an appropriate launching pad for this discussion of how Blackness as an African identity is “formed, deployed, negotiated, and

21 This is a PDF, prepared by the U.S. Department of Education, to help explain NCLB regulations to the general public, Accessed on October 16, 2012.
manipulated in people’s everyday lives” (2004:2). Baker’s framing of identity is essential in that it urges that scholars divorce themselves from abstract conceptualizations of identity to the recognition of its realness, tangibility, and emergence out of everyday experiences. Further, it serves as reminder of the contested nature of identity and how notions of power are intimately connected therein.

I draw upon the work of Kamari Maxine Clarke (2004) and her study of a Yoruba networks in establishing my framework of local/extra-local (global) dynamics as impacting the process by which African Americans construct identity based upon a connection to an African Diaspora. Clarke demonstrates how primarily African-American, Yoruba religious practitioners in the U.S. (Oyotunji Village, South Carolina), Nigeria, and Cuba, connect through deterritorialized spaces, thereby creating networks that are constantly shaped by the movement of people, ideas, and resources across continents and time zones. The traditional origins of Yoruba religious practice are located in southwestern Nigeria and Benin. However, the spread of Yoruba religious practice during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through the transatlantic slave trade and later, the religious revivalists movements of the1960’s, has resulted in the proliferation of Yoruba religious practices. This growth has subsequently fostered the production of “multiple networks of knowledge,” outside of Africa (2004:5). Orisha^22 worship now occurs throughout the Caribbean, Brazil, Cuba, and in various parts of the U.S. Today, there are more Yoruba practitioners, in the hundreds of millions, outside of African than there are on the continent.

The themes of movement and negotiation as variables of community formation figure prominently into Clarke’s study. In researching the ritual and heritage market activities of

^22 Orisha are Yoruba deities to which worshippers pray and make appellations. The worship of the deities constitutes one of the foundational pillars of the Yoruba religion.
Oyotunji Village, and accompanying the community on a pilgrimage to Nigeria, Clarke demonstrates how African descendant identity as expressed through Yoruba religious and cultural practices, is mediated through the political economy of state power, transnationalism, and globalization. She presents how these dynamics converge and the requisite sophistication researchers must employ in their study of such communities.

Clark conveys the fluidity of identity and community belonging and how it is reliant upon processes beyond the immediate community itself, thus reflecting tensions between and within the larger the spheres within which it functions. In a similar fashion, my study focuses on how the different constituents at CCS assign significance to the school as an African-centered space and how that occurs through the interplay between federal and state policies on education, political economic shifts occurring in D.C. neighborhoods, the socio economic constraints that impact families, children, and neighborhoods; and, the varied positionings around Africa as a marker of identity that teachers, families, and students bring to the learning environment.

My study seeks to reveal some of the challenges, opportunities, tensions, and contradictions that are endemic to how Blacks in African-centered schools? construct identities based upon a connection to Africa. African-centered schools, like CCs, exist as part of larger African-centered communities that support them. Many studies have focused on the pedagogical aspect of African-centered education: the process of teaching and learning from a position grounded in African history and culture (Ajirottutu and Pollard 2000; Shockley 2007). Yet, few studies discuss how the process of identity and the varied notions around Blackness and understandings are impacted by those environments (Henry 1998; Morris 2003).

Throughout the remainder of this is dissertation, I speak of African-centered schools as a way of talking about people who construct their identity based upon a sense of connection to
Africa. Because of the multi-vocality expressed by teachers, and parents, around Black identity, I am intentionally choosing not to characterize this school-community as Pan African, Black Nationalist, or Afrocentric, although evidence of these various stances is present at CCS and within the larger African-centered communities within D.C. These terms have also become associated with certain political positions and may distort or detract from the process I am attempting to highlight in my research. Lastly, the term African-centered is used widely by the D.C. African-centered community, and as such, reflects how people talk about and characterize themselves. Starting from the understanding that identity is not fixed, but varied and multidimensional, African-centeredness also suggests an intentionality about how people choose to identify, live, and interact based upon their perceptions of a connection to Africa.

To an extent, proponents of African-centered education and members of African-centered communities assume homogeneity around Blackness and how people see themselves as connected to Africa (Simmons 2007). Yet, my research demonstrates that such assumptions must be challenged. It cannot be assumed that because people, teachers, and students claim a common racial identity that a shared understanding of Blackness follows. Studies such as this seek to address Black essentialism, the belief in a formula of inherent attributes and experiences that all Black people possess. Yet, Black culture cannot be viewed homogeneously, as the Black experience, as with experiences of identity, is varied and dynamic (Dyson 2007; Jackson 2005; Shelby 2005; Washington 2008).

As scholars have noted, the process of constructing identity is fluid, dynamic, and highly variable. For people who base their identities upon their understanding as being connected to Africa, this process is made even more variable because of the global space in which the
diaspora, and thus identities based on connections to the diaspora, exist. As Okpewho (1999) summarizes,

> For a long time the word [diaspora] was employed in reference only to the uni-directional movement of Black peoples from Africa outward…. Given the fluid movement of persons and of ideas from both sides of the Atlantic, and in light of the shifting political and economic relations between Africa and west Atlantic society we have drawn attention to, it becomes clear that diaspora represents a global space, a worldwide web, that account as much for the mother continent as for wherever in the world her offspring may have been driven by the unkind forces of history (1999:xiv).

I frame my research around the interplay between local and extra-local dynamics, discussing how state policies, neighborhood change, and multiple positions from which people at CCS approach Blackness, inform the process of constructing and living identity. I also discuss how the process of African-centered identity is experienced through the prisms of class and gender. As Clarke’s (2004) work which exemplifies, the bi-directional movement of African Diasporans, coupled with nation state policies, contributes to an ever-shifting experience of identity. I argue that these processes also apply to African-centered spaces within U.S. communities. Thus, anthropologists can apply the same level of research rigor and to these sites. My research examines how African-centered identity is contested and negotiated within this space between the various school constituents and how these positions mirror tensions around class and identity existent within the African-American community. In Chapter Three, Context and Setting, I address the historical factors that have attributed to the emergence of numerous iterations of African-centered communities in Washington., D.C.; thereby establishing D.C. as a key location for interrogation of African Diasporic identity.
CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT AND SETTING

In examining CCS as a site of African-centered identity, it is essential that I discuss how I am situating Washington, D.C. in this study. The first aim of this chapter is to present Washington, D.C. as a deterritorialized site of African identity construction; a place this is part of Africa but also apart from Africa (Clarke 2004). It is possible to view the city in this way due to the varied and multiple connections D.C. has had with African descended people historically and within a contemporary context. Through various D.C agencies, institutions, and communities throughout the, D.C. promotes transnational connections between people of the African Diaspora. The second goal of this chapter is to establish CCS as a space of African-centered identity located within the larger deterritorialized site of Washington, D.C. This unique rendering of the city allows us to more clearly see how it city stands as an ideal site for the examination of constructions of African identity. This chapter is not intended to present a chronology of events but to illuminate key events and players in D.C.’s that help accomplish the aims of this chapter.

Dual Deterritoriality

Washington, D.C. is a territory of complexities and contradictions. As the capitol of the nation, the city stands a symbol of freedom and opportunity, Yet, as the only federal territory in the nation, the over 601,000 residents of the District of Columbia are denied the rights of full citizenship enjoyed by other United States citizens (DC Visitors Bureau, 2012). Washington, D.C. is the federal district in the country, the residents of the District of Columbia, the majority of whom until quite recently were Black, lack the ability to determine their political and economic destiny. Congress maintains oversight of the local government and has ultimate authority over the city’s annual budget. The DC Home Rule Act, signed into law in 1973, allows District residents to elect a mayor and city council representatives over its eight wards, which is
the extent of DC’s capacity to self-govern. DC’s representatives to U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives primarily serve in a “shadow” capacity, as they are unable to vote on legislative issues.

Scholars and activists argue that the patriarchal and colonial-like structure of DC perpetuates poverty and inequality, with a major factor being the tax exempt status of the federal government, colleges/ universities and other large-scale non-profits, that occupy nearly 40% of the land in DC (Flowers 2010). Residents of DC pay the highest per capita federal tax rate in the nation. Collectively, residents pay more than 3.8 billion dollars in federal taxes yet, they have no input in how the federal government spends their tax dollars. DC’s lack of autonomy prevents it from being able to institute a commuter tax upon the many federal employees that work in the city but live in Maryland and Virginia or enact any legislation that would attempt to bring more economic parity to the city, without the approval of Congress.

A robust statehood movement has been ongoing in DC for many years although tension exists between the two most active pro-statehood entities. The D.C. Statehood Party\textsuperscript{23} was founded in 1970 by Julius Hobson, Josephine Butler, and Hilda Mason, activists from the 1960s who frame the issue an carryover from the Civil Rights Movement (DC Statehood 2010). The party merged with The Green Party in 1999, and became the D.C. Statehood Green Party. According to information published on their website, they are the only political party in D.C. that advocates for statehood, noting that the Democratic Party removed statehood as a priority issue in 2004. In recent years, another entity has mobilized around the issue of D.C. Statehood. The very active non-profit group DC Vote,\textsuperscript{24} was founded in 1989 and they credit their efforts as

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23} For more information the D.C. Statehood Green party, visit http://dcsgp.yolasite.com}
having led to the historic Senate passage of the D.C. Voting Rights Act (H.R.157/S.160) on February 26, 2009. The organization has initiated a rather successful public awareness campaign around the issue and are responsible for the “Taxation Without Representation” logo being added to DC license plates. Critics of the organization however, note the misleading nature of the slogan and question the organization’s true aims. Race and class tensions are relevant here, as D.C. Vote has strong appeal among D.C.’s affluent newcomers, while the D.C. Statehood Green Party prides itself as a home-grown political organization with active membership from the city’s Black and long-term residents.

Although the city shares the physical land with the contiguous states, it does not share in the same rights and privileges to which other states are entitled. Thus, in a respect, D.C. is deterritorialized from the rest of the United States. Another enduring factor of D.C.’s distinct character is its long history as a segregated city. Neighborhoods, schools, retail, and the essential elements of community have, been demarcated along lines of race and class since the city’s inception (Williams 2002). With few exceptions, Blacks and Whites have lived separate lives in D.C., a city that is only 10 square mile long. The unique political configuration of the District, combined with its significant Black population, bolstered by the presence of Howard University, a preeminent institution of Black higher education, has enabled certain parts of D.C., to develop a distinctly Black cultural presence.

Howard University, U Street and Connections to Africa

Washington, D.C., has long since been a city with significant presence of African and African descended people. Apart from the widely known fact of the nation’s capital as

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DC vote is a non-profit organization that advocates or voting rights and statehood for the District of Columbia. For more information, visit [http://www.dcvote.org/about/index.cfm](http://www.dcvote.org/about/index.cfm)
slaveholding site, it was also the first area to emancipate enslaved Africans (Lusane 2011). With the signing of the District Emancipation Act, on April 16, 1862, approximately nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Washington, D.C. became the first area within the US territory to abolish slavery. The signing freed about 3,128 enslaved people of African descent. Yet, the city was home to approximately 10,000 free Blacks at the time of the signing. Those “freed” men and women faced “severe civil, political, economic, and social restrictions on their freedom” (Lusane 2011:146). Within months of the signing, hundreds of Africans fled to D.C. borders. Although African descended people were unable to live fully as free human beings (Schiffert 2002), the sheer magnitude of an African presence in the early years of D.C.’s history is significant.

Like other U.S. urban settings, African descended people have experienced numerous transitions that have impacted how they have lived and where they lived, much of which has been orchestrated by the insidious legacy of racism and discrimination. Researchers have noted how politics, race, and class had resulted in very interesting shifts in D.C. neighborhoods since the 19th century. Some of these dynamics produced neighborhoods with a significant Black cultural distinction. For example, D.C.’s famous U Street corridor has been well documented by other scholars (Ruble 2010; Smithsonian 2005; Williams, 2002). It is quite well known that during the 1920s and 1930s, the Howard University and U Street area was a thriving hub of Black entertainment and hosted some of the most noted Black talent in the country including Cab Calloway, Pearl Bailey, and Duke Ellington. At different points, the neighborhood was also home to Black intellectuals Thurgood Marshall and Ralph Bunche.

As it relates to this study, Howard University occupies a central role in the alliance between African nations and African Americans. Often, Howard was called to host African
heads of state and dignitaries visiting the nation’s capital and as such, occupied a significant role in solidifying relationships between Black Americans and Africans on the continent. Hamilton (2007) documents that as “early as 1889, there had been extensive contact between Africans and traditionally black colleges and universities. These alliances are what enabled Kwame Nkrumah and Hastings Banda\textsuperscript{25} to pursue studies at Historically Black colleges in the United States. In the 1920’s there was a Harlem and D.C. Renaissance which featured the works of Jean Toomer, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Kelly Miller, and Rayford Logan, among others. In 1953, Howard became one of the first universities to offer an advanced degree in African Studies. The African liberation movement of the 1960’s is another historic event that and also facilitated the higher education pursuits of African immigrants and also increased the activism, identification, and transnational communication between African Americans and Africans. In 1979, the Howard University History department hosted what noted Diaspora scholar, Ruth Simms Hamilton calls, a “historical scholarly conference (2007:23) entitled “The African Diaspora from a Changing Global Perspective” (2007:23). A follow up conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1988. Howard University is likely to have enrolled and graduated more continental Africans than any other university in the area. Current connections with Africa are maintained through numerous organizations and scholarly pursuits.

Two distinguished African American led organizations were founded in D.C. based with steep connections to the African world. Africare\textsuperscript{26} is the largest and oldest NGO to focus on Africa. Since its founding, The organization reports having spent over a $1 billion dollars on

\textsuperscript{25} Hastings Banda was the president of Malawi and its predecessor state Nyasaland, from 1961 to 1994.

\textsuperscript{26} For more information about Africare and its programs, visit www.africare.org.
various humanitarian projects in 35 sub-Saharan African countries. Similarly, TransAfrica, founded by attorney Randall Robinson in 1977, is the oldest African-American run human rights and social justice advocacy organization founded for the expressed purpose of advancing dialogue and advocacy on behalf of Africans in the Diaspora. Robinson is noted for leading a sit-in at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C., in protests of South Africa’s apartheid policies and unjust treatment of Black South Africans and later, going on a hunger strike to support democracy in Haiti.

The degree of engagement that African-Americans have with Africa cannot be adequately captured since many organizations do not attract the attention of large media outlets. For example, organizations like AHEAD, Inc., with whom I traveled to The Gambia, has been leading health and education initiatives in Tanzania since the presidency of Julius Nyerere during the 1970’s, and in The Gambia, since the 1990’s. Numerous African Americans from the Washington, D.C. area and beyond have traveled to these counties with AHEAD and have continued involvement with their African host communities. These types of small scale exchanges, including ones that emerge out of recreational travel to Africa, are not usually considered when we think of engagement with Africa yet these programs often serve as the catalyst for peoples’ sustained involvement, beyond the initial experience. Similarly, a number of

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27 For more information on TransAfrica and TransAfrica Forum, the educational arm of the organization, visit [www.transafrica.org](http://www.transafrica.org).

28 Julius Nyerere was the first president of Tanzania from 1961 to 1985. A Pan-Africanist and a Socialist, Nyerere was known for supporting liberation movements throughout the Diaspora. He initiated a call to Blacks during the 1960’s to repatriate to Tanzania and help rebuild the country.

29 Dr. Irving and Elvira Williams responded to President Nyerere’s call and lived in Tanzania for several years. They later established a non-profit group, Adventures in Health, Education, and Agricultural Development, to allow others of good will to contribute to Africa’s advancement. For more information on AHEAD, Inc., visit [www.aheadinc.org](http://www.aheadinc.org).
universities and colleges in the area engage in international projects and student exchange programs that include travel to Africa and parts of the Diaspora.

The Free South Africa/Anti-Apartheid Movement also deepened the African American connection with, and later, tourism, to South Africa. Other significant African presences in the Washington, D.C. area include a large African immigrant student, and worker population, with significant representation of Ethiopians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Senegalese in the area. Of course the highly anticipated erection of the Smithsonian’s Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to take place in 2015, and will join the Smithsonian’s widely acclaimed Museum of African Art and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, among the nation’s most prestigious museums focusing on African-American and African Diasporic cultures. Thus, in numerous capacities, D.C. has served as a site for continued dialogue and engagement with Africa. The community level engagements, while less visible to the national media, are no less significant in establishing D.C.’s presence as a site of Diasporic identity.

African-Centered Identity in Washington, D.C.

Since the late 1960’s a number of political, arts, cultural, and religious organizations have existed in Washington, D.C. that are founded upon the idea of Blacks as part of the African Diaspora. African-centered communities in D.C. is comprised of various individuals and organizations who understand themselves to be of African descent and who consume, express, and perform their identity based upon that understanding. Black Power Movement during the 1960’s which birthed a network of individuals and organizations all bonded by their sense of themselves as part of the African Diaspora. In addition to the African-centered educational institutions previously discussed, there are a number of political, cultural, religious, and arts organizations that are founded upon the idea of Black identity as African Diasporic identity. I
refer to these organizations as African-centered communities that all contribute to and substantiate the city as a site of African Diaspora identity within Washington, D.C.

Among these organizations are: the African Heritage Drummers and Dancers, Kankouran West African Dance Troupe, Farafina Kan (an African Drumming and Dance Performance Group), Memory of African Culture (M.A.C.), led by the renowned Guinean korah\(^{30}\) player, Baba Djimo Kouyate was also a very popular cultural performance groups that performed throughout the region. Political groups include the All African People’s Revolutionary Party (AARP), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Cultural and non-profit groups include the United Black Community, the African American Holiday Association (AAHA), BZB Entertainment, which hosts an annual gift show that prominently features African-centered art and artists; Juanita Britton, the proprietor of BZB, also has a cultural shop in the Anacostia neighborhood in southeast D.C. On a recent trip to Ghana, Britton was enstooled as Queen Mother of a village. She is currently soliciting donations from the D.C. African-centered community and other supporters to build a school in the village. These are just a few of the individuals and groups, among many, in the African-centered communities of D.C. Members of the aforementioned organizations, and others, continue to publicly celebrate Kwanzaa, African Liberation Day, Malcolm X Day, and other commemororative days that connect Blacks to Africa; thereby, keeping the African-centered community visible and engaged in issues of the African Diaspora.

Like other urban centers with a significant Black population, Washington, D.C. became swept up in the Black Power movement that characterized the latter 1960’s. As with the Civil Rights Movement, it was college students and youth who were at the forefront of political

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\(^{30}\) The korah is a traditional string instrument from west Africa that resembles an The instrument is played sitting with the korah is plucked while positioned between the players legs. Korahs can range in height from For more information on the korah and other African instruments, visit www.
mobilization. On college campuses across the country, Black students were rallying for Black Studies programs that reflected their history, culture, and contemporary social conditions. This new, more direct form of political action appealed to young Blacks and college students at Howard University and Federal City College\textsuperscript{31} because they saw it as a more effective means to bringing about social change and justice for Blacks. These students had been inspired by freedom struggles occurring in other parts of the world: liberation movements on the continents of Africa, Socialist movements in Cuba, and Vietnam. The fervor of Black Power had a particularly strong presence on the campus of Howard University where the young Stokley Carmichael, a SNCC organizer, was emerging as a notable figure in the Black Power movement. Washington, D.C. and Howard University in particular became a popular venue the during the Black Power era, hosting historical figures such as Malcolm X, Bayard Rustin, and Herbert Aptheker for debates and lectures (Carson 2006:104). In addition to national and international figures, Howard University has hosted local African-Americans of note including Jim Vance, NBC News 4 anchorman Jim Vance; Tony Gittens, Director of the D.C. International Filmfest; and, Askia Mohammed, host on D.C.’s public and progressive media radio station WPFW.

The historic Howard University was a bevy of Black political thought and activism that inspired many students to create institutions of change in the neighborhood surrounding the university. For example, Howard student activist Don Freeman along with poet, Gaston Neal, created the New School for Afro-American Thought in 1965 (Humanities Council 2010). The New School operated on 14\textsuperscript{th} and Florida Avenue, NW, for the six years of its existence and was

\textsuperscript{31} Federal City College was established as a land grant institution in 1968. Along with Washington Technical Institute, and Washington Teacher’s College, the three schools were brought together in 1974, under one system of higher education by an act of Congress; thereby establishing The University of the District of Columbia. More information can be obtained about the history of UDC at \url{www.udc.edu}. 
a privately funded cultural and educational center. A documentary on the history of the school’s formation states that is “became a neighborhood nexus for political debates, educational forums, and performances by artists” (Humanities Council 2010). With an overtly Pan Africanist agenda, The New School stands as one of the forerunners in African-centered education, though not as a full-time school but as a supplementary educational program. The Anacostia Freedom School was also one of the early educational institutions that infused African-centered thought, history and culture into its curriculum (Personal interview, Don Freeman (Baba Lumumba), June 2012).

African-Centered Businesses in D.C.

In addition to the presence of historical African-centered educational institutions, there are also a number of business establishments\textsuperscript{32} that are connected to and supported by the various African-centered groups in D.C. Many of these businesses are located on Georgia Avenue, near Howard University, which has over the last thirty years, hosted several businesses that cater to the African-centered community. One of the oldest of these businesses is the Blue Nile Herb Store which started in 1970 as a wholesale distributor of herbal medicines. Blue Nile began retail operations in 1974. The proprietor of the store is, Baba Duku, is Black American but calls himself an African “bushman.” His shop, which is much like botanica (an herb shop), sells over 300 herbs and spices and Duku offers informal health consultations and advice on naturopathic remedies for ailments ranging from asthma to arthritis. He sells over 300 homeopathic herbal mixtures, essential oils, vitamins, candles and religious items, and books on vegetarianism and healthy living.

\textsuperscript{32}Interestingly, these businesses are markedly different from the various African food stores and that be found in various parts of D.C. Unlike the African-centered business who sell crafts, clothes, and personal, and spiritual items, these African stores cater to African immigrants and primarily vend food items that are sold in West Africa are difficult to find in grocery stores.
Another historic site in the area was the House of Knowledge Complex located opposite Blue Nile, at 2849 Georgia Avenue, which from the mid 1970’s until the early 1990’s, housed several businesses whom, in varying ways, operated with a Black liberation agenda. The building was owned by long time D.C. activist and entrepreneur Baba Hodari Abdul-Ali, who from 1977 to 1988, owned and operated Liberation Information Distributing Company, a wholesale distributor of books and periodicals about Africa, Blacks, and Islam. In 1981, Hodari founded Pyramid Books whose holdings consisted of books and periodicals, written by Blacks in the Diaspora. According to one community source, Deborah “Wala” Bernard, who worked at Pyramid for a stint during the 1980’s, “it was a rich and wonderful place where you could meet cultural people of the day” (Personal communication, June 12, 2012). By 1990, Pyramid Books had grown to be the first chain of independent Black owned and oriented bookstores in the United States with locations in Maryland and California. The store’s distinct mission was reflected in its external appearance. Perhaps to attract visitors to the store, and/or to convey its African-centered perspective, Baba Hodari had a carving of a Black Egyptian sphinx affixed to the front of the building. The sphinx projected into the street by almost two feet. This author recalls the stately carving that was painted Black and demanded attention by passersby. Other occupants of the House of Knowledge complex included a bakery; a hand-made jewelry store (Jewels of Aton); a gift shop, and health food store. The site also hosted lectures by authors of books sold in the Pyramid Book store, arts events, and community gatherings. I recall the vibrancy of this area during the mid-1980’s, particularly during summer months. Patrons would move in and out of businesses which kept their doors open from which African drumming, jazz, or reggae music would flow out into the street. Street corner vendors would walk along the street.

selling their wares. Women and men with dreads, naturals, and cornrows, dressed in dashikis, African clothes and revolutionary t-shirts donning the images of Malcolm X or Marcus Garvey, would gather along that three block area, almost giving it the feel of “little Africa.” The success of Pyramid Books is likely to have inspired the creation of similar businesses in other parts of the D.C. area like Sisterspace and Books, a bookstore owned by two African-American women whose collection primarily consisted of literature by and about Black women. Yawa Books and Karibu Books, both Black owned bookstores that opened long after Pyramid, were surely inspired by the Black bookstore precedent established by Baba Hodari. Pyramid Books closed in 1996. Baba Hodari later succumbed to cancer in 2011. His memory, however, and the vibrancy that his business and others inspired on Georgia Avenue, lives vividly among members of D.C.’s African-centered communities, particularly those that experienced it during its days of thriving.

Demographic shifts in occurring throughout the city and certainly in the Shaw neighborhood have begun to alter the look of the Georgia Avenue corridor. Seven Powers of Africa, a small boutique that sold African clothes and fabrics, jewelry, and African spiritual items closed more recently in the summer of 2009 due to declined business. The vacant, lopsided white building, with its metal security bars, sits just one block north of Blue Nile Botanicals. It is now neighbored by a newly constructed development of condominiums. More recent African-centered merchants in the area seem to be holding steady. Among them are: Sankofa Video, Café, and Books34, which sells progressive films and books made by Africans of the Diaspora; Everlasting Life and Soul Vegetarian, two vegan restaurants that were both, at one time, operated by the African Hebrew Israelite community; and Children of the Sun, which sells African inspired clothes, art, and handmade jewelry.

34 Sankofa Books and Video is owned by filmmaker Haile Gerima, most noted for his film, Sankofa (1993), which tells the story of Mona, a Black supermodel who is transported through time and finds herself on a plantation during the days of slavery.
Alongside the few businesses on or near Georgia Avenue that cater to African-centered communities, those that attract a wealthier demographic have begun to populate Georgia Avenue. Young, white, urbanites have also begun frequenting the vegan restaurants, Everlasting Life Café and Soul Vegetarian. Further up Georgia Avenue, White owned businesses are beginning to emerge in these neighborhoods that have been mostly occupied by Black residents. A prime example is the Yes! Organic Market, which sits on the ground level of a mixed-income and mixed-use apartment building, located approximately a half of a mile north of the African-centered business hub. A White owned coffee shop, Qualia Coffee, is just one block away and new condominiums and springing up around the Petworth neighborhood.

The marked economic and racial change occurring in the Shaw and Petworth communities, where many of the African-centered businesses are located, have a direct impact upon how people live in “community” with one another, more specifically the composition of neighborhoods and the relationships within those neighborhoods. The changes occurring on lower Georgia Avenue in particular, have relevance for how members of the D.C. African-centered community connect with one another, share resources, and continue to nurture their community. Further, the influx of White urbanites has implications for the African-centered community’s continued ability to name and claim a physical space, that for three decades, they called their own.

African Religious Groups

The traditional African religious community in D.C. has been another key player in the establishment and growth of the African-centered presence in Washington, D.C., particularly the Akan religion, which is the traditional belief system of the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa.
The Akan houses are indeed among the most visible of the African-Centered communities in D.C. This is particularly true for the women who often dress in African print fabric, wear close cropped natural haircuts, and sometimes adorn colorful spiritual beads of protection around their ankles and wrists.

Nana Asantwee Opokuwaa (2005) documents the history of the Akan religion in America in her book, *Quest for Spiritual Transformation: Introduction to Traditional Akan Religion, Rituals, and Practice*. Nana Asantwee Opokuwaa identifies the genesis of Akan religious practice in America, which she calls Akan Akom tradition, to the ancestral quest of the late Nana Yao Dinizulu I, who journeyed to Ghana to confirm his grandmother’s oral history of their family’s origins in Ghana. During a visit to Ghana in 1965, Nana Dinizulu received a shrine consultation which confirmed that his ancestors were indeed from Ghana. While on that trip, Nana Dinizulu was initiated into the religion as an Akan priest and was made Omanehene and Okomfohene of all Akans in America. He returned to the U.S. with sacred shrines that would be later used during initiatory rites. In 1971, Nana Dinizulu formed the Akonedi Shrine thereby, making him the first to officially bring the Akan religion to the United States. With the assistance of his elder who had traveled from Ghana, Nana Oparabea began initiating Black men and women into the Akan religion and training them to be Akomfo, servants and worshippers of the Akan deities (Opokuwaa 2005). Among those early initiates was Nana Kwabena Brown, from Mount Vernon, New York. By 1978, Nana Brown had moved to Washington, D.C., and opened the Temple of Nyame, the second official Asuo Gyebi Shrine in America under the advisement of Okomfohema Nana Akua Oparebea. Thus, the Akan community is the oldest and the largest community of Traditional African religious practitioners in the city.

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35 Shrines are sacred sites of spiritual worship. Worshippers visit the shrine to pray and make appellations and offers to the god.
Currently, there are several Akan shrine houses in D.C. along with other African religious practitioners including the Yoruba community, the Ausar Auset Society, which practices the ancient religion of Kemet (Egyptian), and the Haitian Vodoun community. These various religious groups (called “houses”) also interact with regularity, as many religious rites entail a private and public component to which the larger community is encouraged to attend. For example, after an initiate completes their training under a senior priest, a public “coming out” ceremony is held to present the new priest to the larger community and to acknowledge their successful completion of their apprenticeship. Although each religious house has their own particular way of worshipping, their commonalities are the principles that underlie many traditional African religious systems which include reverence for ancestors; oneness with the natural world; and, worship of a supreme being and the deities (Mbiti 1990).

The Ausar Auset Society International describes itself as a “Pan African religious organization that has been providing Afrocentric based spiritual training to the African American community and to African descendants in the Diaspora…for over 30 years (Ausar Auset website, accessed September 21, 2012). However, unlike the Akan and Yoruba communities, the Kemetic religion was not brought to the United States and revived. The organization was founded in 1973 by His Excellency, Shekhem Ur Shekhem (King) and Ashem Ur Ashemu (High Priest), Ra Un Nefer Amen 1, the Ausar Auset Society is headquartered in New York City. The Society has branches in several major cities in the United States, as well as in London, Toronto, Trinidad and Bermuda. Similar to the Yoruba and Akan African spiritual systems, The organization teaches Kamitic philosophy (cosmology), meditation and ritual, oracle consultation, yoga, nutrition, herbalism, homeopathy, astrology, and African history and culture. Similar to the Akan and
Yoruba spiritual systems, the Kamitic belief system is based upon a supreme being and the recognition of other deities that govern nature and the lives of humans.

In 1999, the leader of the Yoruba Temple of Spiritual Elevation and Enlightenment, Chief (Pamela) Iya N’Ifa Efunyale Ifarilola (affectionately called Mother Taylor) was spiritually led to call together the various traditional African houses in D.C. to collectively worship and usher in an era of healing and enlightenment as the new millennium approached. It was a fitting task for Mother Taylor who, at 72 years old at the time, was one of the oldest and senior most African religious priests in Washington, D.C. Mother Taylor was born in Guyana but raised in Trinidad where she began her initial religious training Trinidad within the Spiritual Baptist religion. She moved to the United States in 1974, and after some time, resumed her training at Oyotunji Village in South Carolina36 (Clarke 2004) and in Oyo State in Nigeria. The various African religious houses responded to the call and under Mother’s leadership, they organized a collective Prayer and Worship Service that was held in January 2000. The collective called themselves The Traditional African Spiritual Coalition (TASC) and contained at one time, up to 14 different African religious houses Spiritual Houses, the most populous being the Akan religion. For the first several years after its formation the members of the TASC held annual, collective prayer and worship services within the first few months of the New Year.

In 2004, TASC collaborated with the International Center for Cultural Studies37 and hosted a conference on traditional African religious practices where the 14 member organizations It was the second conference in a series of seven hosted by ICCS to promote understanding of ancient

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36 Clarke (2004) writes extensively about the transnational community of Yoruba worshipers in Oyotunji Village, near Beaufort, South Carolina. The site is where many practitioners of the Yoruba religion underwent initiations and spiritual training during the 1960’s and 1970’s.

37 For more information on the International Center for Cultural Studies, visit the website www.iccsus.org/events-2/past-events/
traditions and cultures of the world. TASC had a period of inactivity during the mid-2000’s but have recently begun resuming activities. Recently, the D.C. Chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) invited TASC to convene a spiritual healing service for its members and the broader Black community. The event was held in March of 2012 and was attended by people within and outside of the African-centered community. The work of TASC and other African-centered groups and sites in DC have served as platforms for convening the multi-faceted aspects of the African-centered community in D.C., which as I have demonstrated here, is as dynamic as its rich history. CCS emerges from this history of the African-centered communities in D.C., and by virtue of its existence, is contributing to its community’s current history. Likewise, CCS also emerged out of the charter school movement by way of educational reform. As such, it is necessary to explore that history, as it impacts how constituents at CCS perceive of the school as an African-centered space. I will turn to that discussion after speaking of the composition of CCS.

(Independent) African-Centered Schools

Washington, D.C., is home to two significant institutions in the African-centered educational movement, which are Ujamaa Shule\(^{38}\), and Nationhouse Positive Action Center. Ujamaa Shule (Ujamaa), which means community school in the East African language of Kiswahili, is the oldest independent African-centered full-time school in the country. Ujamaa was founded by Dr. El Sezengakulu Zulu in 1968. Dr. Zulu was a student activist and a graduate of the Howard University School of Law who, after completing his studies, served as the director of the DC chapter of the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For 44 years, the school has provided African-centered education to children in the Shaw neighborhood.

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\(^{38}\) For more information on Ujamaa Shule, visit [www.ujamaaschool.com](http://www.ujamaaschool.com).
Another historic institution is the Nationhouse Positive Action Center (Nationhouse), another pioneer of African-centered independent education in the nation and in D.C. The school was founded by four student activists at Howard University: Akili Ron Anderson; Kwame Aygie Akoto; Akua Serwaa Akoto; and, Kehembe Eichelberger, and is located in a monstrous brick building in the residential neighborhood of Petworth. The school’s black, red, green, and yellow painted exterior has a huge wooden Adinkra symbol affixed to it, signaling others that it is not a typical house or building. Nationhouse opened its doors in 1974, growing in its educational capacity as the founding families and surrounding African-centered community also grew. The school is also the site of one of the Akan shrines in D.C., which I will discuss later in the chapter. The school now serves students in pre-school through 12th grade and has a 38 year history in Washington, DC. Finally, ROOTS Activity Learning Center is another independently founded African-centered school that was established by Dr. Bernida Thomas in 1977. Of the three independent African-centered schools, ROOTS is the only one that also has a charter school which started in 1999. All three schools have a long and successful history of providing quality African-centered education in Washington, D.C. and in so doing, advancing the idea of Blacks as connected to a larger African Diasporic community. In addition to CCS, there have also been three other African-centered public charter schools to open since 1996, when the D.C. Board of

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39 For more information on Nationhouse Positive Action Center, visit [www.nationhouse.org](http://www.nationhouse.org).

40 Adinkra is the name given to colorful, hand-painted, hand-embroidered cloth traditionally used for mourning by the Akan people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast (Cote d’Ivoire). Stylistic symbols called Adinkra symbols are printed on these cloths. Traditionally the cloths and symbols expressed the wearer's feelings and sentiments about the deceased. They are used worldwide today and in popular culture. For more information, visit [www.amazon.com/The-Adinkra-dictionary-visual-language/dp/0966153219](http://www.amazon.com/The-Adinkra-dictionary-visual-language/dp/0966153219). One of the most exhaustive pieces written on Adinkra symbology is The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra by W. Bruce Willis, 1998.

41 For more information on ROOTS Activity Learning Center, visit [www.rootsactivitylc.org](http://www.rootsactivitylc.org).

42 For more information on ROOTS Public Charter school, visit [www.rootspcs.org](http://www.rootspcs.org).

43 All three charters have now been closed by the D.C. Charter School Board
Education began authorizing charters. In 1973, Mama Rasheed started the Kuumba Learning Center in D.C.’s Ward 8, which is east of the Anacostia River and one of the city’s poorest, densely populated, and underserved wards.

The idea of African-centered education was the most impactful and enduring extension of the Pan Africanist movement of the 1960’s. The influence of this educational approach is evident in the numerous African-centered supplementary programs, public school models, and other charter schools who attempt to emulate the independent school model (Giddings 2001; Henry 1998; Murrell 1996; Weber 1993). The presence of African-centered schools and programs in the various communities in which they exist today is possible because of the support of the broader African-centered communities of which they are a part. These African-centered communities are constitutive of individuals who are connected by an ideology of identity, relationships, and resources rooted in their perception of themselves as descendants of Africa and for whom this perception shapes how they experience their identity in the world.

Community Charter School - A Deterritorialized Site within D.C.

Community Charter Schools (CCS), reflects, albeit in limited ways, the continued history of African Diasporic engagement in Washington, D.C. Inspired by the Black resistance movements of the 1960s, the school aims to offer an empowering form of public education for Black children by centralizing their historical and cultural experiences and racial/ethnic identity in its educational model through the public charter school mechanism. Although the school opened in 2000, well after the 1960’s, the ideology of Pan Africanism inspired the school’s educational philosophy. The continued presence of African-centered communities in Washington, D.C. provides CCS with an historical, ideological, and political space within which to exist and connect with other members of this community.
CCS is located in Ward 5 in the Morewood section in Northeast, D.C. Ward 5 is one of the more diverse neighborhoods in the city. According to 2010 Census data, the population for Ward 5 was 74,308 people. The Black/non-Hispanic population was 77% while Latinos comprised 15% (Neighborhood Info D.C., Ward 5 Profile, 2010). Just blocks away from the school is New York Avenue, which turns into Interstate 50, a major highway that leads to points north and south of the Washington, D.C. Appropriately named, New York Avenue once housed retail warehouses, factories, and a bustling commercial district. Many of these building are now closed and boarded up, standing as reminders of the city’s once thriving industrial sector and employment market. This will soon change, however, as Ward 5 is slated to undergo several revitalization projects over the next decade or so, the most significant of which is the erection of the city’s first of four Wal-Mart retail stores. This development will undoubtedly spur continued racial/ethnic and demographic changes that have already begun to occur in other D.C. neighborhoods like the Shaw, Anacostia, and Petworth communities.

The area immediately surrounding the school consists of a rather diverse and unusual mix of commercial, residential, and industrial spaces. Although the neighborhood contains various types of properties—single-family homes, residential rental property, public housing, the area is still largely commercial. It has a few hotels, private storage companies, banks, fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and other businesses lined along the busy corridor. A national park, a popular tourist attraction and a main thoroughfare are, just minutes away from CCS. CCS is located in a small, formerly industrial neighborhood, and sits on a one black street, behind a

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44 Neighborhood Info D.C. is a project of the Urban Institute and the Washington, D.C.
45 An earlier proposal included the construction of up to ten Wal-Mart stores in and around D.C.. This proposal was met with strong opposition by several local community organizations and labor groups. The” Stop Wal-Mart” campaign lobbied for equitable labor practices, higher wages, and employee benefits.
46 A more extensive discussion of the effects of gentrification upon the African-centered community is offered in Chapter 3.
major road that is serviced by a Metro bus line. Its location is somewhat obscure. Although I had occasionally visited the school prior to conducting my formal fieldwork, it took about a month before I could make my way there without calling the school’s receptionist for directions. The three story school building, which was once a commercial sign making company can be easily missed. It sits somewhat hidden behind a row of auto repair shops whose entrance face the school off of a major bus line in northeast D.C. The vibrantly brightly colored building is a welcomed contrast to the dullness of its immediate surroundings -- a check cashing liquor store, two taxicab lots, two vacant warehouses, and a development of garden style apartments that are shrouded by trees.

Within a quarter mile of the school is a District of Columbia government facility for seniors, a construction of garden style apartments erected around the mid 1980’s, a very small development of single-family town homes, and a D.C. government parks and recreation center. CCS does not have a gymnasium so physical education classes are held at the D.C. Recreation Center. Students ride the school bus the short three blocks to the facility. A large grassy field sits just behind the school; however, students are not permitted to use it for physical education.

Many students at CCS live in the Peabody Public Housing Project, located within walking distance of the school. While trying to recruit Terrance\textsuperscript{47}, a CCS student who lived in Peabody, for the youth program I agreed to coordinate, I ventured into the community with the intent of hand delivering a letter and application to his mailbox. An entry in my notebook of field observations describes the condition of Peabody and the typical state of many of D.C.’s public housing developments.

\textsuperscript{47} A pseudonym.
The collection of yellow mid-rise buildings looked intimidating to an outsider. The buildings, which looked like 1950’s marine style barracks, were woefully neglected, as if someone had forgotten that people lived here, people who were trying to make a life, lived here with their children, husbands, friends, and lovers. The walls screamed for a fresh coat of paint, their fading yellow stained from exposure to the elements. It was a hot day, at least 90 degrees but folks still sat on their stoops, small 4x5 cement slabs that jutted out from the front door that could only accommodate one or two modestly sized people. Some units had air conditioning units in the windows but many did not. Windows were pulled up high, inviting in whatever breeze would accept the invitation. But it was hot. There was no breeze. There were mostly women I saw gathered on the “front” of the buildings, chatting with their girlfriends, watching their small children play. I pass a parked ice cream truck, a staple of summer in the inner city, with excited kids and a couple of adults cued for a cold and sweet treat, a refreshing indulgence and respite from the inferno-like temperatures (M. Chatman, fieldnotes, July 2010).

The presence of this housing project contributes to Ward 5’s sobering economic and employment profile. According to a 2008 study of D.C. neighborhoods conducted by the Urban Institute, Ward 5 had the third highest unemployment rate in the city at 8.8%, following Wards 7 and 8, high-poverty areas of Washington, D.C. with large Black family households. The report also added that cluster where CCS is located, has the third highest rate of residents who receive public aid in the form of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), and Food Stamps. This same cluster had one of the highest subprime lending rates in the city, ranking among the top three wards. These data clarify the socioeconomic status of this part of the city.

The Founding of CCS

CCS was founded in 1999, by a group of community members led by Valerie “Rakia” Wayne, or Mama Rakia, as the students and staff call her. Mama Rakia, who serves as the school’s Executive Director and Principal of the Upper Academy (grades 6 – 8), is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She moved to Washington, D.C. in 1983 and earned her master’s

48 The actual cluster number has been withheld to protect the identity of the neighborhood and school.
50 A pseudonym
degree in public administration from George Washington University. After completing an internship at a local nonprofit organization, she began looking for work in the Washington, D.C. area. The D.C. City Council had recently passed legislation allowing charter schools to exist in the District. Consequently, parents and community groups were invited to submit proposals to start charter schools. Along with a core of other parents, educators, and community members concerned about public education, particularly for Black children, Mama Rakia wrote a proposal to start CCS. It was to be one of the few African-centered public charter schools in D.C. The City Council approved the school’s charter in 2000, and the school began operations that September in the upper floors of a local museum.

Rakia is a dynamic, constantly busy woman. She responds to emails before 7am and works out most mornings before coming to CCS. She is a rather petite, dark-brown woman who wears little make-up. Her plentiful back-length dreadlocks are always perfectly manicured and styled. She appears to always be on a mission, constantly in the midst of a meeting, consultation, brainstorming with her dean of students or principal, redirecting students, or consulting with the school’s business manager. Rakia is an adopted name that represents her own African cultural reattachment process (Shockley 2003). When asked about her motivation for starting a charter school, Ms. Wayne identified her son, Jamal, as her muse. She said that Jamal was about eight years old when she began the process of starting the school. In trying to find an optimal educational environment for him, she moved him around quite a bit, transferring him from school to school. She realized the disruption this created for his learning and said, “I just couldn’t do that to him.” (Personal interview, December 2010). Ms. Wayne said she was in search of a holistic environment for Jamal. When asked what she meant by the term holistic, she replied,

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51 The adoption of an African name to reflect an inner shift or change in identity/identification is a common practice. A name change or addition is an outward reflection of an inner attainment, symbolizes an internal shift or change within a person.
Holistic is a place where a little black boy (laughs a little) with nappy hair, vegan, vegetarian can flourish. Where teachers have high expectations for him regardless of what he looks like,[or] what complexion he is, [or] what ethnicity he is. and there's not a lot of violence and kind of negative influences like negative teachers or negative people (kinds of drags these words out), profanity, or a lot of children fighting every day...he was at Howard University Learning Center for his early childhood piece, then he did kindergarten at an African-centered school with Abena Walker but then her school closed so then from there I began that hopping from you know, one place in first grade, he was somewhere else for second and [Iwas like] you know, I can't, I can't do this. So to me that's holistic, just really, where your child's spirit can flourish (Personal Interview, December 23, 2010)

Mama Rakia’s comments illustrate her belief that the ultimate educational environment for Black children is one where not only students’ academic needs are met, but their physical safety, emotional, and, psychological well-being are also ensured. Thus, the emphasis on holistic education as Mama Rakia characterizes it, considers the whole child in its approach - the cognitive, cultural, physical, and emotional/psychological aspects of the child. Her comments also illuminate the centrality of race, gender, and class in the enterprise of quality educational for Black children. She talks about her son being valued despite the negative assumptions that society and sometimes educators make about a child, based on a child’s appearance, such as complexion and hairstyle. She also alludes to class. Vegetarianism and veganism is not a lifestyle typically associated with poor or low-income people and families. Class is also relevant to educational mobility, as Mama Rakia possessed the financial, intellectual, and emotional resources to move her son from school to school until she found, or in this case, created, the best possible environment for him.

Mama Rakia expounded further upon what she considered the three pillars of African-centered education: 1) the realization that all children are divine (gifts from the Creator); 2) the belief in children’s inherent intelligence and unlimited potential and the subsequent role of the adults in nurturing the child’s in nurturing those latent talents and abilities; and 3) that education is an internal process and primarily serves to elevate the individual and the family and
community of which they are a part. Mama Rakia’s comments are not only her treatise on the education of Black children, they also serve as a discourse on Blackness, on how one should live as an African-descended person in America and the responsibility that such persons should hold towards one another. Mama Rakia’s philosophy of education is important because as the founder and Executive Director of CCS, it informs the vision of African-centered education and perhaps more importantly, it influences how the school environment promotes African-centeredness as an identity.

Mama Rakia’s passion for and commitment to Black families is clearly visible in her interactions with students and families. She conveys this at a Back to School Night Program held at the beginning of the school year for new and returning parents and their children. Using the call and response style, which is very popular in Black churches linguistic tradition, Mama Rakia tries to elicit excitement from the parents in attendance. I captured the exchange in my fieldnotes,

At back to school night, the Principal and Executive Director, Mama Rakia made announcements. She explained to the parents that “we do the songs and affirmations to encourage the child to have a good day. She says to the parents, “they’re born geniuses but we want to make sure they’re happy.” Mama Rakia attempts to elicit a response from the parents but they are mostly silent or indifferent. She urges the parents to agree with her by saying, “Can I get a yebo" (yes), an Amen, a boom shaka laka (expression from a Black sitcom).” A few parents reluctantly say yebo but their participation is lackluster in comparison to Mama Rakia’s exuberance (September 2010).

Through her affiliation with African-centered religious, cultural, and educational organizations in D.C, Mama Rakia positions the school as an African-centered space. As such, many of the community practices at CCS mirror those that are also practiced at Independent African-centered schools. The relationships that Mama Rakia has established with other African-centered organizations allows the school access to a number of networks and validates it as an African-

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52 Yebo (pronounced yay-bow) is a Zulu word that means yes and was used
centered space. These relationships with other African-centered groups are evidenced at CCS through some of the families that patronize the schools; through the broader community’s perception of the school; and through the African-centered community members who work and volunteer at the school.

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) asserts that theory making can be healing and liberating and in an attempt to make sense of our world, humans constantly engage in theory making. Rakia says that CCS was founded upon a theory about the inherent goodness, divine nature, and educability of Black children. These ideas were passed on to Rakia by Abena Walker, a longtime advocate of African-centered education and one of the first in recent D.C. history to operate a public, African-centered school-within-a school model. Until rather recently, these ideas were not popular in mainstream educational discourse which advanced ideas of the genetic and cultural inferiority of Black children. African-centered schools have served a healing and restorative function for the numerous injuries sustained by the Black body and psyche as a result of centuries of oppression and marginalization. In this way, the African-centered schools and the larger community of which they are a part operate as agents of empowerment and identity construction for the Black families and youth they serve.

**Student Composition of CCS**

The racial/ethnic composition of the student body is 100% Black with approximately 95% of students qualifying for free or reduced meals (My School Chooser, 2010). CCS’s school enrollment for the 2010-2011 school year was approximately 320 students. Many students who live outside of the immediate neighborhood take the CCS bus53 to school. As with many charter schools, CCS provides numerous services and programs to support the families it serves including free transportation, before and after care, parenting classes, dinner, and Saturday  

53 The bus drops off and picks up students at designated spots in several D.C. neighborhoods.
school. Saturday school is not mandatory but students are highly encouraged to attend it to improve their reading and math skills. A field trip often follows instruction, as an incentive to students. Many of the teachers and staff I interviewed during my fieldwork thought that these services contributed significantly to student retention, as many families relied upon these services.

Staff Composition

The school currently employs about 50 people, most of whom are full-time employees. The staff includes a Principal of the lower academy, a Dean of Students, a Parent Coordinator, a School Psychologist, and a Nurse. The teaching team consists of about 28 people, 20 teachers and 8 teachers’ assistants who provide support in the elementary classrooms. The majority of teachers and staff at CCS are African American, mirroring the racial/ethnic composition of the student body. The exceptions are a teacher’s assistant and the school’s business manager, both of whom are from Ghana, and a female teacher’s assistant from Trinidad. Even with this slight amount of diversity, the entire school staff is Black. The only other evidence of racial/ethnic diversity within the school is the janitorial staff, which maintains the physical property. Based on my observations, the janitorial staff is predominantly Latino.

The racial/ethnic homogeneity of CCS is not atypical for Washington, D.C. public schools. D.C. had a significant free Black population during the early 1800’s and was home to some of the first training institutions for teachers in the nation, including the Miner Normal Schools for Colored Girls and the Burroughs School for Girls (Smithsonian 2005). For years, D.C. has been home to a thriving Black middle class, many of whom, especially women, worked

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54 Blackness here includes people who identify racially as Black, although they may not be African Americans. For example, CCS has a Ghanaian teacher’s assistant and a Trinidadian teacher’s assistant who would fit under this designation.

Like most of the schools in D.C, students are required to wear a school uniform. At CCS, the uniform consists of beige khaki pants and a white or purple polo shirt that contains the CCS logo. Teachers and staff at CCS, are not required to dress in African attire, as is the case in some independent African-centered schools. Rather, a business casual dress code is allowed. On numerous occasions, I have seen teachers wearing jeans, khakis and other fashionable clothes, sometimes testing what I thought were the boundaries of semi-professional dress. Many teachers and staff also wear dreadlocks or other natural styles (unchemically processed). This is noteworthy, as oftentimes, hairstyle is taken to indicate a particular political stance and identification with Black identity. It is interesting to note however, that individuals at the school, who wore dreadlocks, were individuals in key positions who had a level of proximity to the executive director. They included the only remaining teacher of the founding cohort of staff, Baba Bill, the dean of students, Mama Olu; and the Educational Facilitator, Mama Kaye.

**School Building and School Décor**

CCS is located in a three-story aluminum and brick school building that was once a commercial sign making company. The school’s name is displayed proudly on the front of the building. Although the exterior of the school looks like an average public school building, the interior décor conveys a strong Black identity based on the abundance of art that depicting various aspects of Black history and culture. As soon as you enter the building, colorful images of Black people in various settings and historical contexts. For example, a blue hanging of African mudcloth is suspended from the ceiling. It is an indication of the quality of art one will see
throughout the school. The artwork looks as if it was all carefully chosen for the environment.

Pictures of deceased Civil Rights leaders, and formerly enslaved Africans seem to communicate the ubiquitous presence of African ancestors. In the main office is a hanging of Frederick Douglass’s, *What To A Slave Is The 4th Of July?*, a newspaper article shellacked on an ornately wooden plaque, giving it a wonderful aged look. There is a plethora of art in the building, made by Blacks and about Blacks. There are also contemporary posters of select rap and hip-hop artists, pictures of Malcolm X, and pictures of Bob Marley. There are also powerful, historical images like the framed black and white lithograph of three young Black teens being sprayed by a water hose. In the photo of the three youths, two huddled, trying to shield each other from the water and insipid pain of the racist south. From contemporary pieces with historical and social significance such as the Little Rock 9 picture that hangs above the library, to African carvings and small sculptures that adorn many of the common areas like the office and conference rooms, the school is generously filled with artifacts of African and African American identity.

In the main office hangs a portrait of a stoic Frederick Douglass. Next to his image, black words from one of Douglass’s speeches stand out against a white background,

> There is no Negro problem in America
> The problem is whether America has the courage enough,
> Loyalty enough, honor enough, and patriotism enough
> to live up to its own Constitution.

Other images of ancestors and historical “giants” occupy the common spaces of the school, the hallways, the cafeteria, and the main office. Also located in the main office is a wall hanging of a Most Wanted poster of Harriet Tubman, which reads, “Harriet Tubman is a fugitive slave. She is

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55 The Little Rock 9 were the historic group of nine Black young men and women who attempted to desegregate Little Rock Central High School in 1957. They were not called the Little Rock 9 initially, but have come to be referred as such in history books and in popular conversations about Black history and the Civil Rights era.
wanted for helping slaves escape. Wanted Dead or Alive. Reward: $40,000.” 56 The poster features the popular image of Tubman wearing what appears to be a white collared shirt, an overcoat, a bandana, and an unyielding look of determination in her eyes. The staff conference room on the third floor contains Egyptian paintings on papyrus paper. Two vibrantly colored prints of profiled Black woman clothed in varying deep hues of green, purple, red and blue enliven the walls. The woman’s hair is braided, her features gracefully bold. Her confident chin prominently juts forward.

The multitude of Black art present at CCS conveys a statement about the school’s identity as a repository of the African American experience and a reminder of the continued struggle for African American equality and empowerment. The artwork also casts CCS as symbol of empowerment and freedom --- freedom of expression. Within the walls and hallways of CCS, the members of this school community are able to express themselves as intellectual, historical, spiritual, emotional, beings and subjects of history, not only as objects of oppression and injustice. In addition to the Black art, CCS uses numerous cultural referents in the school environment such as Adinkra symbols, African proverbs, and the Black Nationalist Flag of red, black, green. 57 The purposefulness of the school décor perhaps serves to emphasize ownership and authority over the space, reflecting back to the school’s exclusively African American student population and staff. The images reflect their own story and agency. The presence of the art might also be an effort to communicate to the CCS community the beauty of African

56 A historian who appeared on WPFW (89.3 FM) during Black History Month 2012, referenced the information on the poster and refuted its accuracy.

57 Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) commissioned what has been called the African Liberation or Black Nationalist flag. The flag, which has come to signify Black solidarity, has three horizontal bars. The red bar symbolizes the blood of all black people, black stands for the black race and green symbolizes land and nationhood.
aesthetics and the accessibility of African art forms thereby demonstrating that the narrative of
the African experience is not only for the exhibit halls of museums but is attainable for everyone.

CCS was established with an African-centered focus in order to promote learning within
an environment that fosters a “positive” racial and cultural identity for African American
children and youth. The school meets this aim by incorporating “traces of African-centered
methodology in[to] [school] rituals, routines & intent with which [they] impact instruction &
character-building support” (Electronic Communication, November 2007). The school also
reflects African-centered pedagogy in their aesthetics and some daily practices. For example, the
hallways, bulletin boards and classrooms are adorned with art from the African Diaspora; the
Black Nationalist Flag in the colors of red, black and green hangs in the front exterior of the
building and another is displayed in the cafeteria/multi-purpose room, children and adults use
Swahili and Twi language expressions for greetings and calling students to order. The school
recognizes commemorative dates in African American history like Black History Month,
Kwanzaa, Martin Luther King’s Birthday; and Black Love Day\(^58\), as opposed to Valentine’s Day.
Children are exposed to African drumming and dance and other forms of world music.
Additionally, the entire school community gathers at the beginning and end of each week to
perform an opening and closing ritual which includes songs, affirmative chants, and awards, as a
way of unifying the school community; increasing students’ enthusiasm for learning; and,
promoting an overall positive self-concept among students and staff.

School Practices

\(^58\) Black Love Day, celebrated on February 13, is recognized as a day to promote love and healing within
the Black community. It was created by Ayo Handy Kendi, founder of the non-profit organization The African
American Holiday Association (AAHA), based in Washington, D.C.. AAHA promotes awareness about events of
social and historical significance for African Americans like Juneteenth, Kwanzaa, and African Liberation Day. For
more information on AAHA, visit \url{http://urbanmediaboss.blogspot.com/2011/02/nyz-akoma-o-take-heart-be-patient-black.html}
Many of the group practices at CCS are designed to promote Black racial pride and cultural and historical awareness for the students and staff. CCS, as a school, does not recognize commercial holidays that one would typically find at other schools, particularly elementary schools. The school does not hold Halloween parties, Valentine’s Day dances, Christmas celebrations, or Thanksgiving programs. Rather, the school recognizes Black cultural events and commemorative days such as the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Kwanzaa, Black History Month, and Black Love Day. These refutations of what many Pan Africanists would consider Eurocentric holidays that oppress Black psychologically and economically is a common element in African-centered schools started during the Black Power era of the 1960’s (Austin 2006).

These particular school features are also what education scholar, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) might classify as culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). In her conceptualization of the term, Ladson-Billings asserts that CRP “empowers students emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (20). CRP includes instructional and social practices, within and outside of the classroom, that use the students’ culture to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture (2009:19). Contemporary cultural references that are more relevant to students’ social realities are also expressed, especially during school events when the entire community gathers. Students often appropriate popular rap and hip-hop songs for these programs, trading the creative and sometimes less-than positive lyrics for ones that are more appropriate and relevant for school events. For example, during a Black Love Day Program, held to honor and celebrate the Black family, a group of four middle school girls performed a rap. As they jerked shoulders, bobbed their heads, and snapped their fingers, they melodically proclaimed in unison,

Black Love is
The best love I ever had.
Black Love
Make you feel Michael Jackson BAD!

In 2010, the Black Love Program was combined with a pep rally to excite students about the upcoming D.C. CAS exam\textsuperscript{59}. Student performance on this test largely determines whether a school makes AYP and ultimately, if it will remain open. Each class creatively delivered a message about test preparation using hip-hop, poetry, skits, and songs. The standard information on getting a good night’s sleep, eating a healthy breakfast the morning of the test, and answering easy questions first to save time for more challenging ones, was presented by student groups. After the presentations were completed, Baba Eric, the music teacher, led a handful of male student in a West African drum rhythm, which at some point they turned, into a go-go beat, the percussive music style that is indigenous to Washington, D.C. and enjoyed by many youth\textsuperscript{60}. The students let out a shout of pleasure and recognition as they began to move to the rhythms. Eventually, almost the entire school community was caught up in the driving go-go beat chanting,

\begin{verbatim}
We gon’ pass
The D.C. CAS
We gon’ pass
The D.C. CAS
\end{verbatim}

Teachers, students, and even the Executive Director were visibly enjoying the music. Students cheered, chanted, and crunked\textsuperscript{61} to the music. It was controlled chaos where even the principal, Mama Rakia, and other adults danced, laughed, and enjoyed the moment. After several minutes of this D.C. flavored pep, Mama Rakia calmed everyone down and helped serve snacks to the

\textsuperscript{59} The D.C. CAS is the standardized test required for all D.C. public and charter schools students between 1\textsuperscript{st} and 8\textsuperscript{th} grade.

\textsuperscript{60} Go-Go music is a unique music style that originated in Washington, D.C. but he late musician, Chuck Brown. For more information on go-go music, see “The Beat: Go-Go Music from Washington, D.C: American Made Music by Charles Stephenson and Kip Lorrell ("

\textsuperscript{61} Crunking is a southern hip-hop dance style that originated in Tennessee.
student body before she dismissed them for the day. As these examples demonstrate, another way in which CCS actualizes culturally relevant pedagogy is through language, the performance of culture, and expression. The “performance” of Black culture in the school, including the use of Black cultural referents, allows for a sense of agency, freedom of expression, and ownership of the physical space. Through their linguistic work and social interactions, teachers, staff, and students assert the school as their own cultural space, a space of belonging.

Another way in which the school attempts to make the educational experience relevant for its completely Black student body is through rituals, regular weekly practices aimed at promoting a positive racial identity and reinforcing a sense of community and belonging. One such practice is the Monday morning ritual where the school community gathers in the multi-purpose room, which they call the Village Center, to engage in an exercise designed to set the tone for the week, inspire students’ positive mood and excite them about rejoining the learning community after the weekend absence. The ritual that begins with everyone singing Lift Every Voice and Sing, informally called The Negro National Anthem, whose haunting words were composed by James Weldon Johnson and the musical accompaniment written by brother Robert Johnson. Lift Every Voice sings of the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade, the oppressive past of Africans in America, and their triumph over injustice through faith and resistance. Everyone then sings a Negro spiritual, Woke up this Morning With My Mind Stayed on Freedom. This song feels more like a cheer-like chant. Many students sing it with exuberance and conviction. The lyrics are as follows,

I woke up this morning with my mind staaayed on freedom.
I woke up with morning with my mind staaayed on freedom.
I woke up this morning with my mind staaaayed on freedom.
Hallelu, hallelu, halleluuuuuah.
We gonna walk about, talk about it, fight for it, fight for it.
Staaayed on freedom.
We gonna walk about it, talk about it, fight for it, fight for it.
Staayed on freedom.
We gonna walk about it, talk about it, fight for it, fight for it.
Staayed on freedom.
Hallelu, hallelu, halleluuuuah.

Next, the community sings the school song, which promotes allegiance to the academics, and honoring family and community. They then recite the school pledge, a poem that composed by a local artist specifically for CCS. The pledge contains the most explicit language about an ancestral connection to Africa and a contemporary link between the school and a broader African Diasporic community. Select language from the poem reads as follows,

We are born of an old seed
We are growing from deep root
We are part of a strong branch
We are the sweet fruit of the African Family tree
Wherever we may go
Wherever we may be
I am a part of you
You are a part of me
And the fruit don’t fall too far from the tree
We are the hopes and dreams of all humanity
We are Community Charter School (written by Camille Yarborough)

The morning ritual ends with a collective recitation of a poem called, I Am Good, which was written by the school psychologist. This poem affirms the inherent goodness of the self, and the power each individual possess to choose to have a good day. Verses from the poem read, “I can be respectful to others today, I can act in appropriate ways today.” The affirmative poem ends with the line, “Today is a good day because I am here.” The poem attaches the child’s value to his or her mere presence rather than to grades, clothes, hair, or any other external feature or circumstance. Teachers are expected to repeat the ritual in their classrooms every morning.

A similar closing ritual is held on Friday afternoon during the last hour of the school day. During the closing ceremony, students are recognized with awards for their academic and/or
behavioral accomplishments during the week. This ritualistic opening and closing of the school week is one of the more prominent features of the school which is aimed at promoting a sense of Black unity and connectedness.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Participant observation is a research methodology which involves engaging extensively within a research community or group as means of understanding the nuances of behavior and shared cultural understandings. Though many social scientists now utilize ethnographic research techniques in their research, the frequency, depth, and intentionality of the cultural anthropologists’ use of participant observations remains one of the field’s distinguishing features from the other social sciences (Spradley 1979). In answering the research question of how this school community understands and perceive of their connection to an African Diaspora, I conducted over 200 hours of field research and school-wide participant observation at Community Charter School over an eighteen-month period. The purpose of this cultural immersion was to help me understand how the CCS school community understood the concept of African-centeredness and what value they assigned it in their daily experience. I attended numerous school programs like Back to School Night, Parent Meetings, the after-school enrichment program; and holiday/cultural programs. I also observed assisted in classrooms, in the hallways during class transitions; in the cafeteria, and on the playground. This “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998) provided me with valuable insight into the history, relationships, power dynamics, and daily operations at Community Charter School and also provided a broader context for analyzing and interpreting my data.

I collected my data using various qualitative research data collection strategies including formal and informal interviews, conversations, participant observation in classrooms and in the general school environment, focus groups with teachers and students, and numerous informal conversations with teachers, students, and staff. In the sections that follow, I explain in greater detail my research approach and methodology. Prior to that however, I discuss how I selected
this research site and how my presence impacted and directed the course of my data collection and how this site is connected to a larger and more extended community.

**Researcher Positionality**

All anthropologists bring a subjective self to the research in which they engage in. At once, ethnographic research is almost as much as about the community or group studied, as it is about the researcher who conducted the investigation. Attempting to understand the complexities of human social behavior is a mammoth, upon which numerous factors hinge. How an anthropologist is received within the community, what the community chooses to disclose and keep silent, is very much related to how the researcher presents herself to the community of inquiry. Michael Agar (1996:91) aptly describes the process,

> Ethnography is really quite an arrogant enterprise in that despite the biases s/he brings to the endeavor, anthropologists forge ahead with the task of attempting to study, understand, and analyze some of the most intimate intricacies of a culture or group of people.

I approach this research from multiple levels of knowing and familiarity which of course, impacts my level access to information and the level of authority with which I discuss the issues raised in this research. I have been involved in the cultural nationalist community in Washington, DC for approximately twenty years, becoming moving from the periphery to the core of this loosely constructed collective of individuals as the years progressed. Who I am and how I presented myself to this school community had a direct and tangible impact upon how the various players at CCS interacted with me and I, with them. My relationship with this research site dates back to the early years of the school’s formation in 2000. I am acquainted with the school’s founder through a community organization that promotes women’s wellness within the context of African and indigenous spiritual systems. During the school’s first years, my mother worked as a teacher’s assistant in a Pre-kindergarten classroom and because I would frequently
visit, I became familiar with some of the school’s practices and some of its staff and families. I
am also a member of a musical ensemble that promotes a Pan African, Black cultural
empowerment message. The members wear African clothes when we perform and most of our
performance material, jazz, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, and spoken word, contain a political
message centered on African liberation and countering oppression within the African Diaspora.
Several staff at CCS, including the founder and executive director, are also familiar with me
through my band affiliation and have supported our music, appearing frequently at performances.
I have been affiliated with this school community long enough to see it transition through
numerous stages, countless transitions in staff and physical location, and identity shifts. My
initial involvement at CCS was grounded in my interest in its educational approach. However, as
I advanced in my graduate coursework, I more inspired to pose more nuanced questions about
these schools and the families and communities that patronize them.

Two graduate courses in particular, Anthropology of Education and Discourse, Text, and
Voice (DTV) were instrumental in helping me refine my interest in African-centered education
and identity for my doctoral research. In the Spring of 2008, while enrolled in the DTV seminar,
I conducted preliminary field work at CCS. I spent approximately twenty hours as a participant
observer in the creative arts classroom and I also conducted a two hour interview with the
creative arts teacher and used the interview data for my final paper. This course greatly
influenced how I understand language and how I work with text. From November 2008 to April
2009, I volunteered weekly in a third grade class at CCS, where I assisted students with reading
exercises aimed at increasing their performance on the DC CAS standardized test. I began my
official, IRB approved data collection in January 2010 through July 2011. The various roles that
I occupied within the school-community up until the start of my data collection, facilitated
rapport with the school’s staff and faculty and helped me obtain access and trust that later proved extremely beneficial.

As my research progressed at CCS, it seemed that my official role as researcher began to fade into the recesses of my social identity, yet it remained at the forefront of my consciousness. After some time, faculty and staff seemed to interact with me as part of the staff, one of the regular characters in the school. This perhaps was facilitated by my acceptance of a short-term (4 months) consultancy offered by the school’s executive director, to coordinate youth leadership activities for alumni of CCS. Still, I maintained a standard of ethical research and professionalism while managing the dual roles.

**Native Anthropology**

My proximity to the community studied here, both geographically and ideologically, qualifies this study as a case in native anthropology. The community among which I conducted my research represents, at least in part, some of my views about Pan Africanism and liberation. This community is reflective of my identity as a woman of the African Diaspora whom in her own way, manifests the principles of Afrocentricity offered by Sefa Dei, as outlined in Chapter 1. Although this research topic and community are close to me, this factor did not compromise the quality or rigor of my research. My scholarly training affords me the ability to as objectively as any human being can, examine what unfolds before me and problematize the issues I am studying.

A continuing argument within the discipline of anthropology involves the perceived necessity for the native anthropologist to maintain objectivity in her research. Many have argued that conducting research in ones’ own community increases the likelihood of bias, as data is filtered through the researchers multiple positionalities and subjectivities. Thus, a researcher’s
objectivity is sacrificed by their proximity and identification with the community under study. However, researchers, regardless of their background and degree of proximity, always see through subjective lenses. Their positions on race, class, gender, power, and privilege, and a number of other stances, always impact the research process. The anthropologist, whether conducting a “native” or “foreign” investigation, always filters information through their subjectivities. I contend that it is the presence of these subjectivities that offers a unique and useful insider’s perspective to understanding dynamics within this community. Thus, I make explicit my subjectivities early on in this endeavor for the sake of transparency. Because I share a sense of connection to this community through the various ways I disclosed earlier in the text (my family members’ former employment there and my membership in a Yoruba religious community, and the performance ensemble), I experienced a degree of reluctance in addressing certain issues. Concerns about the school’s academic performance, and tensions between administrators and teachers, are among some of the issues I approach cautiously here.

I am also aware that my physical presentation, my dreadlocks and occasional dress in African and African inspired attire may have caused people to make assumptions about my political stance. People may have assumed that I was “pro-Africa” which may have skewed their honest interaction with me. Of course, the extent to which people’s interactions with me were shaped by their perception of me cannot be fully known. However, it is worth mentioning here as human interaction is often at first based upon an assessment of a person’s outward appearance and physical characteristics.
Data Collection Methods

Participant Observation

The field experience comprised a constant negotiation of decisions about where best to position myself to obtain the most intimate view possible of the school’s organization and practices. Classroom observations were valuable in that they provided a sense of teacher and student interaction, student engagement in the classroom, and curriculum and pedagogical practices. However, they were also limiting in that I could not engage in with teachers and students in a manner that I thought was essential. My original research design focused heavily on classroom discourse as a way of understanding how teachers and students construct their racial identity. However, after some time in the “field”, I realized that something more essential was emerging as the research question. I became more interested in learning how the various players at this institution understood and internalized African-centeredness which was core to the school’s founding. As such, I modified my data collection techniques to include more school-wide observations and informal interviews, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews, and numerous conversations with members of the school-community. I spent a significant portion of my time at CCS observing unstructured activities which included spending time in the main office, the teachers’ lounge, technology lab, and multipurpose room. I thought these spaces would allow me a different perspective of what happens apart from the rather limited or confined activities of the classroom.

For example, I spent a significant amount of time in the technology lab where Baba Batik was the instructor. I often assisted him in his classroom that comprised about 24 personal computer stations. On more than one occasion, I helped him run his class bouncing between students to offer help with the hardware or the content of their assignments. When the lab was quiet, I would often pop in to “check-in” with Baba Batik to see how he was doing. He often
shared his feelings of being overwhelmed by his duties as technology teacher and trainer and data manager for the school staff. These brief visits and my willing assistance, helped up establish an easy camaraderie. We also connected over music as Baba Batik was a recorded saxophonist. We built camaraderie around music, he knew that I was a musician and we spoke several times, albeit noncommittally, about him sitting in on one of our sessions. Interactions like these made it rather effortless to arrange formal interviews.

I made a concerted effort to make my “rounds” around the key places in the school as much as possible. I tried to spend blocks of time in the common areas or those that got lots of varied traffic. Among these places were the hallway, the cafeteria during the after school enrichment activities and lunch; and the school library. The office and the teacher’s lounge were particularly interesting places to gather informal data. The lounge housed a heavy volume photocopier and teachers and their assistants would come in throughout the day it, often having brief conversations while making their copies or waiting to use the machine. The refrigerator and three round dining tables were also in the lounge area. The only adult size bathrooms were also in this room so it naturally attracted lots of traffic.

Structured and Semi-structured Interviews

In depth interviews are a cornerstone of anthropological methodology and offer a valuable way to obtain insights into social and cultural phenomena (Agar 1996; Spradley 1979). I intended to use a modified version of Siedman’s (2006) interviewing technique designed specifically for educational and social science research which entails a three-part interview process. Each interview serves a discrete purpose and is intentionally designed to take invite respondents to reflect upon their inspiration for entering teaching; their daily teaching practices; and the meaning of their teaching experience. However, this strategy proved to not be feasible
for my research site for several reasons that I discuss later in this section. My interviews lasted from 30 – 60 minutes depending upon the respondent’s time and the events occurring in the school that day. All teacher and staff interviews took place in their classrooms or offices.

Fortunately, I was able to conduct an impressive number of interviews with teachers and staff. I also had an innumerable amount of informal conversations with teachers, parents, students, and others who comprised this school-community. Many people were interested in my research and willing to talk to me about their work at CCS and share with me their impressions of the school. A select list of respondents included the Dean of Students, the School Psychologist, the upper academy Social Studies teacher, the Parent Coordinator, the Bus Attendant, and the Main Office Administrative Assistant.

Parent interviews we also conducted in approximately one-hour sessions and either took place at CCS or at the parents’ residence. I used a number of recruitment strategies to obtain parent participants for my research. I requested referrals from the Parent Coordinator and the Dean of Students since they worked so closely with parents in their assigned duties. I also approached parents directly at school events such as the Parent Empowerment Workshops, Back to School Night, and holiday and cultural programs. Finally, I also approached a few parents as they retrieved their children from school. The latter strategy proved to be the most ineffective at securing parent interview subjects as parents were busy and rather dismissive of the idea of being interviewed. Most of the parents who agreed to be interviewed were those that were already very active in the school in some way. Every respondent was explained the informed of the consent process and signed a consent form prior to the start of their interview. All of the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder, transcribed, and later analyzed.
Interview subjects

My interview subjects were individuals who emerged as key players at CCS and are those whom I thought, based on their role and position within the school, could give an accurate representation of school life. A brief summary of my respondents is provided here.

Parent Respondents

Mama Neal works in the main office as the administrative assistant and attendance monitor. She has two children at CCS, both are in the upper academy. She formerly worked as the bus attendant.

Mama Elaine has two daughters at CCS, one in the upper academy and one in the lower academy. She volunteers regularly at CCS. Her oldest daughter at CCS previously attended an independent African-centered school.

Mama Kofa is from a multigenerational African-centered family. I designate her as such because she and her parents are involved in the African religious community in DC. She attended African-centered schools in her youth and she had two sons enrolled at CCS during my data collection phase.

The Wilsons are parents of two CCS students in the lower academy. They were referred by the parent coordinator, Mama Jennell. The Wilsons were very involved parents at CCS. I interviewed them at their home in northeast Washington, DC.

Mama Monroe works as the bus attendant and is at the school almost daily. Her son and nephew attended CCS although both attended other schools during my data collection period.

Educator Respondents (Teachers and Staff)

Mama Rakia is the Executive Director and Founder of CCS. She started the school in 2000. During my research, she acted as the principal of the upper academy (grades 6-8). She is
from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and she came to Washington, D.C. to pursue graduate studies in the mid 1990’s. She holds a Master’s Degree in Public Administration and has lived in the DC area for over twenty ears. She has a son, who matriculated at CCS through 8th grade. He is now a college sophomore.

Mama Olu is the Dean of Students and has been at CCS. Her duties are to manage the student behavior through the school’s behavior modification program. She also oversees the behavioral team and supervises the In-School-Suspension (ISS) office. Her position puts her in close and regular interaction with students at CCS. She proved invaluable in helping me understand the socioeconomic context of the students and families represented at CCS. She also serves as the coordinator for the senior class graduation, prom, and class trip. Mama Olu is quite intimately involved with the families at CCS.

Mama Gregg is the English Literature teacher for the upper academy. She is an impassioned and enthusiastic educator who is highly regarded by the middle school students. Baba Batik is the Technology Instructor at CCS, he operates the computer lab. Baba Eric is the music teacher at CCS. He plays various instruments including African drums (Djembe drum, Dun Duns) and piano.

Baba Hart is the only teacher remaining from the founding staff. He teaches first grade and offers a He is approximately 60 years old, and wears long gray dreadlocks. He is the last remaining teacher from the original cohort.

Baba Wood is the IT consultant at the school. He has been at CCS for 10 years.

Baba Daniels is the Math teacher for the upper academy.

Baba Lamar has been at CCS for approximately 7 years. He is a young and very popular teacher who connects well with his 4th grade students.
Mama Kaye is the educational facilitator for English. In this capacity, she brings instructional supports to teachers, coordinates their professional development, and procures instructional resources for teachers to support them in their classroom instruction.

A group of nineteen instructional and non-instructional staff participated in a three focus groups during which they staff shared their perceptions of African-centered ideology. Focus group participants were from the lower and middle academy. The participants were comprised of head classroom teachers of all subjects (primary grades) and upper academy teachers. Teacher assistants and “special” (arts, language, and technology) teachers did not participate in the focus group because they were had to cover classes to enable lead teachers to attend the focus group. Participants completed a pre-survey prior to the focus group which inquired about their previous work experience and thoughts about the school. A sample of the survey is included in the Appendix of this document.

Student Respondents

Rayvon is an upper academy student whom I met through the Dean of Students.

Derrick and Marquan are two high school males who participated in the youth leadership program I coordinated. Derrick is a graduate of CCS but Marquan is not. They attended the same high school. My interactions with them occurred afterschool, twice weekly, between September and December 2010.

Ceylon was a participant in the after school youth development program I coordinated. She graduated from CCS in 2009 but stayed in contact with several teachers and the school’s executive director. Ceylon was among the four girls from CCS whom I escorted on a five-day southern college bus tour.
DeJuan was an upper academy 8th grader who participated in the field trips I coordinated as part of the youth program.

Student Input and Interactions

Youth perspectives are an invaluable component of educational ethnographies. Having worked with urban youth for the majority of my professional life, I was committed to obtaining the input of the students who attended CCS. I was particularly interested in learning what students thought about their school’s Afrocentric feature and whether they believed it improved their knowledge of African American history and culture and if this in some way enhanced their feelings of self-pride and attachment or identification to Africa and African peoples throughout the Diaspora. As this is not a psychological investigation, I did not administer any psychological assessments to obtain this data, as this is beyond my expertise and outside the scope of this research. Rather, I sought to obtain this data through observation of students’ discursive practices and interactions with their teachers and schools staff and with each other.

In August of 2010, during my data collection period, the school’s Executive Director offered me a temporary position as a youth development consultant. She was aware of my previous youth development work and excitedly yet, cautiously approached me, since she also knew I was working on my dissertation. The school had been awarded funds under the Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center Program to expand its services. I accepted the position because I anticipated that it would allow me more insider status at the school, components that were not so easy to gain access to, even for someone as familiar to the environment as I was. My duties were to coordinate enrichment after-school academic support and enrichment activities for CCS alumni who had graduated within the last three years but who still lived in the neighborhood and/or attended neighboring high schools. Eventually, I
extended the program’s services to the school’s currently enrolled 8\textsuperscript{th} graders (the senior class) and a select groups of 7\textsuperscript{th} graders whose behavior, the Dean of Students determined, merited participation.

I coordinated and participated in a number of activities over the four months of my assignment. For examples, I accompanied five girls on a five day southern college tour to several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); and a group of about fifteen students on a day trip to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where we shopped, ate and visited historic sites like the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church, established in 1794. We also visited the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology where students saw tombstones from Egypt and the largest sphinx outside of Egypt and other relics from North Africa. Local excursions included a bowling trip, and indoor rock climbing excursion, and a half-day outdoor adventure trip complete with a 330 foot zip line and low ropes course, and team-based activities. I also arranged for a group of students to take a cooking class at CCS and several female students took a hip-hop dance class at a local studio near the school. Finally, I arranged for my wedding caterer, who was a winner on the Food Network’s America’s Top Chef, give a career talk and prepare and serve a meal to a group of students and faculty at CCS. This experience helped immeasurably in gaining access to the youth of CCS. The youth perspectives I gained were largely a result of the relationship and familiarity I was able to forge with them through my role as the youth development facilitators. Many of the youth saw me as one of the “cool mamas” who took them on fun field trips and occasionally laughed with them. My work with the youth group facilitated my interactions and relationship with the school body as a whole. Because I led the youth group, I was at CCS even more frequently than before. My
status as “staff” although I was only a consultant, elevated me to receive certain amenities mostly afforded to regular staff like a mailbox in the office and a school email address.

Youth Focus Groups

I decided to hold focus groups with students rather than conduct individual interviews, in order to access several students’ perspectives at once. I worked closely with the Dean of Students, Mama Olu, in identifying students for the focus groups. The school used a color coded behavior system to promote personal responsibility and appropriate behavior among students. Students earned points for displaying The High Five Behavioral Principles throughout the day. Offenses such as fighting, tardiness without a written excuse, disrespectful behavior displayed toward staff or teachers, or failure to wear the school uniform were not rewarded. The duties of the Dean of Student consisted primarily of managing student behavior and as such, she was intimately familiar with students’ capabilities, and challenges. Thus, I was not completely free to select any student to participate in the focus groups, but I had to operate within the parameters of the school’s structure. Yet, I felt adhering to the school’s regulations for interacting with students was reasonable and did not place an undue burden or compromise my research.

My intention was to conduct three focus groups with small groups of 8 – 10 students in grades 6 through 8 at Community Charter School. I chose this age group because of their ability to better articulate their views and perspectives on their educational experience than younger students. The purpose of the sessions was to engage students in a dialogue on their perceptions about their education, school, teachers, Blackness, and the Afrocentric focus and features of their schooling experience. I had planned to conduct focus group with boys from the three grades, one with girls, and a mixed gender focus group. The gender separate focus groups sessions were intended to mitigate gender bias and to create an environment in which both genders felt open to
expressing themselves (Sadker & Sadker 1995). All students in the 7th and 8th grades were given consent forms for the focus group. Those that returned signed consent forms and were in good academic standing were allowed to participate in the sessions. Participation was determined in the focus groups was granted to ill be granted based on those that who were in good standing at the school (behaviorally more so than academically), and who returned a signed parental consent form.

Teachers were cooperative in allowing me to speak to their classes about the project and in some cases, they encouraged students to attend. However students rarely returned signed consent forms. Because of their very structured and demanding day at CCS, I could only schedule focus groups sessions after a minimum of signed consent forms were returned. To hold a focus group with two or three students, I thought would not have been the best use of time and too disruptive to the school schedule for students. I surmised that perhaps the text-heavy consent forms may have been intimidating to parents, making it less likely that they would read and sign it. Thus I created a colorful and easy to read cover letter to introduce the formal research documents. Thus, I wrote a one page letter explaining the nature of my research, the benefits and costs to their child’s participation, and instructions on completing the attached consent form. The letter also contained a small, but clear, 2x3 smiling photograph of myself. My assumption was that the more personable letter might elicit a greater response from parents. I had also hoped that parents might recognize me from the picture as would be more compliant with completing the forms and allowing their child to participate in a focus group. I also included my personal contact information was also included on the letter and IRB approved parental consent forms. I printed the letter on salmon colored photocopy paper so it would stand out among the other forms. Yet, despite this preparation, few students returned signed consent forms permitting their
participation in the discussions. They frequently said they forgot to return the forms. It is possible that after noticing the length of the form and its relative complexity, parents were reluctant to signing it.

Unfortunately, even this innovation failed to yield the response I was hoping for. I eventually held two focus group sessions, one with three girls and one with a group of 9 eighth grade boys and girls, the graduating class. Other attempts at holding focus groups were unsuccessful either because so few students returned their forms or due to scheduling conflicts. Washington (2009) presents a similar challenge in her research with high school students of color in Prince George’s County, Maryland, and illuminates the challenges of conducting research with minors and the need for more creative ways of engaging this population. Thus, much of the information I obtained about student perspectives occurred through the countless informal conversations I had with them throughout my data collection period.

Informants, Respondents, and Key Actors

Fetterman (2010) distinguishes between key actors and respondents in ethnographic interviewing, saying that key actor may be not be a “central or even indispensable community members (2010:50) but they become key actors in the “theater of ethnographic research” and as such, play a pivotal role, linking the fieldworker and the community. These individuals, he asserts, are rarely “perfect representatives” but are on the periphery of activity, somewhat on the outside but still close enough to the center to see what is going on; removed but close enough to the mainstream to offer a valuable perspective (2010:52)

Several staff and teachers at CCS became instrumental in helping me gain an understanding about the complexities and nuances life at CCS. Mama Olu, the Dean of Students, became a key informant for and the faculty member with whom I developed the closest
relationship. She provided a great amount of insight into school history, policies, procedures, and politics. When selecting students for activities she would often say, “Mama, I don’t wanna give you no headaches” (students that she knew would be difficult to manage). I trusted her judgment and sensed that while she was very protective of CCS, she was always authentic in our interactions. Other key actors in my research included the IT consultant; the librarian who was newly hired for the September 2010-2011 school year; the Technology Instructor, and the After-School Program coordinator. These individuals helped me gain a broader perspective of this school’s purpose and functioning than I otherwise would have ascertained.

As I had anticipated, the consulting position afforded me a degree of access and insider status that I had not previously experienced up to that point. I was also offered a work space in the area I will call the “Student Services” section on the second level because other student related administrative offices were in the large, partitioned office. The special education team (SPED), parent coordinator, and the enrichment coordinator, were all housed in this area of the building. Our row of door-less cubicles was sandwiched between the In School Suspension (ISS) Room and Dean of Student’s office on one end and the School Psychologist’s office, which of course, had a door, on the other end. Because such sensitive documents and business took place there, students were not allowed into the area unattended.

Though I was to share the office space with psychology intern, the lighting was very poor in that area of the building so I often conducted my planning in the staff lounge which had windows, a microwave, refrigerator, a small sofa, three round tables with chairs, a photocopier, and two bathrooms. I soon learned that the lounge was a bevy of activity and there was always someone in the staff lounge with whom to interact and very often a conversation was ensuing.
that related to some aspect of CCS life, providing another window of insight into the school’s practices.

**Teacher Focus Groups**

Having spent several months in the school observing classrooms and having countless informal interactions with teachers and staff, I realized how tremendously busy the school was in general, and teachers’ were specifically. Being on the school’s email list, I also able to remain apprised/aware of the many demands placed upon teachers limited schedules and time. Notices would go out almost daily reminding teachers to submit forms, or attend meetings, or . I realized that it meeting with teachers three times, as I had originally proposed was not feasible. Thus, I decided in December 2010, to add teacher focus groups to my research protocol. With the assistance of the school’s Educational Team Leader, Mama Kaye, who allowed me to use her teacher planning period to hold focus groups, I was able to hold a marathon of three teacher focus groups in one day. I informed teachers (and staff) by sending an email notification about the focus group. The notice went out to about 30 teachers and staff and only two responded with interest in the focus groups. I soon realized that the school email was not a very effective two-way communication system. Fortunately, I had also placed colored orange “invitations” in the staff mailboxes in the main office which is where teachers clocked in and out daily. I also spoke to several teachers about the focus groups as I passed them in the hallway. A total of 16 teachers and three administrators participated in the focus groups. I provided refreshments and raffled off three Target Gift Cards as incentives. Participants rather enthusiastically shared their perspectives on the character and quality of education at CCS, the school leadership, and their impressions of parents and students. The focus groups were held with the teachers of the primary (Kindergarten - 2nd grade); secondary (3rd – 5th grade), and intermediate grades (6th – 8th grades),
respectively. Each session was recorded with a digital recorder and a paid note taker also took typewritten notes during the session.

**Archival Data**

In addition to the ethnographic interview and participant observation data I obtained, I also collected school materials and literature that were either mailed to parents or was available for family and community distribution. Included in this category are the monthly student newsletters; letters about upcoming programs or special announcements; and, school-produced fliers about upcoming events. I collected approximately 16 school newsletters which were published bi-weekly and analyzed their content for messages about Black and/or African culture, history, and empowerment.

**Internet and Social Networking**

The internet also proved to be a useful tool in helping me understand the relationship between CCS and the broader Afrocentric cultural nationalist community in Washington, DC. I accepted an invitation to join a virtual community of supporters of one of the oldest African-centered IBI’s in the country and in Washington, DC. Within this community, members dialogue about African-centered education, promote Black businesses and arts organizations, and post announcements of educational and cultural events that would be of interest to the African nationalist community. Here announcements were shared about speaking engagements and other activities taking place at CCS and I also registered with a website called Myschoolchosrer.com which posts profiles of public schools in Washington, DC. I used obtained insight into parents’ perceptions of CCS by reading the school reviews and comments posted by parents whose
children attended CCS. The website contained fourteen parent reviews from 2004 – 2012. These data were used to help understand the public image of CCS.

Data Analysis

I conducted content and thematic analysis on the interview and archival data. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed manually using ExpressScribe software. Initially, data were coded by hand based on major themes that emerged from the interview transcripts. Secondary coding was done using Nvivo 8 Qualitative Analysis Software. The use of archival data, along with interview data with numerous players occupying varying levels in the school’s strata, helped to triangulate certain information contained in the interviews. In informal and semi-structured interviews, informants were asked the same or similar questions to verify the accuracy of data.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

PART I- CONSTITUENTS AND PERCEPTIONS

The constituents at CCS consist of a heterogeneous group of African descended Blacks who hold diverse views on how race and identity factor into the education of African American children, which subsequently influences how these educators operate in a school environment founded upon notions of African Americans as connected to an African Diaspora. Based on my analysis of the interview and observational data, I have identified three groups with distinctly different perceptions about CCS as an African-centered space which I refer to as: 1) Minority Educators and Parents; 2) Majority Educators and Parents; and, 3) Neighborhood Parents and Youth. These designations are based upon the relative percentages of teachers, administrators, and parents, who comprise the school-community and are not based on popular understandings of the terms minority and majority that are race based conceptions of the term majority and minority. Minority Educators and Parents at CCS are those individuals who assign significance to the school as an African-centered space. These individuals also claim an African-centered identity, which they express in numerous ways including adopting African names, joining African religious organization, wearing African clothes, and being pro-Africa, meaning engaged around issues affecting the live of African people. The Majority group is constitutive of educators and parents who do not perceive of CCS as a primarily African-centered space and for whom this feature is not a central element in how they function within the school environment. The third constituency, Neighborhood Parents & Youth, conceive of CCS as a family-centered space whose location, social services, and educational program holds significance. Although

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62 I use the term Black here instead of African American to be inclusive of the African and West Indian born staff and educators at CCS would identity racially as Black not necessarily as African American.
these groups differ in how they conceptualize CCS, they all express how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the climate of neoliberal education impacts the school’s viability.

Group I - Minority Educators and Parents

Only a handful of educators\textsuperscript{63} at CCS assign significance to the school as an African-centered space and because of this, I call them the Minority Educators. Some members of this group consider CCS as an extension of the African-centered communities within which they are intimately involved. As such, their interaction and performance within the school are shaped by these dynamics. Some of the players that comprise the minority group are Mama Rakia, the founder and executive director of CCS; Baba Hart, the senior teacher on staff; Nana Laila, the Creative Arts teacher; Baba John, the music teacher; Mama Kaye, the educational facilitator; the two Minority Group parents I interview here are Mama Kofa and Mama Elaine. While these individuals hold positions of prominence in the school and attach great significance to it as an African-centered space, they comprise only a small cohort of the educators and parents at the school. Individuals in this category actualize their understanding of CCS as an African-centered space in three ways which are: 1) through rituals and practices inspired by African cultures; 2) through their adoption of Afrocentricity\textsuperscript{64} as a personal ideology; and, 3) through the practice of African-centered pedagogy.

As the founder and Executive Director of CCS, Mama Rakia has been largely responsible for shaping the school’s vision and mission. She has been involved in African-centered communities in the Washington, D.C, area for over a decade, which factors significantly into the

\textsuperscript{63} I use the term educators to broadly encompass all adults in the school environment which include teachers, administrators, and behavior and support staff. This characterization is based upon the notion that students are constantly learning from the adults in the school environment, not just those that instruct classes.

\textsuperscript{64} Many staff and teachers use African-centeredness and Afrocentricity interchangeably. I do the same here except for instances when I am referring to Afrocentricity as an analytical tool, like that advanced by Molefi Asante (1994).
school’s designation as an African-centered institution. Her foundation in African-centered education is rooted in her relationship with her mentor, Abena Walker, a former D.C. school teacher who opened the first African-centered public school model in Washington, D.C. in 1992 (Walker 1998). Rakia has subsequently been involved with African study groups; an African revivalist religious organization. Through her various interactions with African-centered groups and individuals throughout D.C., she positions CCS as an African-centered space.

For example, CCS regularly posts an advertisement in the annual Kwanzaa calendar published by the United Black Community, a small cultural arts and education organization in D.C. The calendar lists free and low-cost Kwanzaa programs occurring in the D.C. area between December 26th and January 1st. Based upon her approval, the school also hosts a number of lectures, performances, spiritual, and community events hosted by African-centered organizations and individuals such as Runoko Rashidi and Tony Browder, both Kemetic scholars; and Nana Kwabena Brown, one of the senior Akan priests in D.C. African-centered cultural artists also teach classes or hold workshops at CCS. On several occasions I witnessed noted local performers, an African American griot (storyteller) Baba Len, and a widely acclaimed West African drummer, Bab Kamari, substitute at the school. Nana Laila, an African dancer, and performance artist, also works as the school’s full-time creative arts instructor. Nana Laila is also an Akan priestess and performs at cultural and spiritual celebrations throughout the D.C. region. Thus, through these relationships with organizations and individuals, Mama Rakia legitimates the school as an African-centered space. These connections have also enabled her to

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65 Under former school superintendent Franklin Smith’s leadership, Abena Walker was granted permission to open a school based on upon a model of African-centered education that she created. Walker was criticized for including among her credentials a master’s degree from her Pan-African University, a school that she created and through which later “trained” teachers and granted degrees in African-centered pedagogy. The school was eventually closed by D.C. School Superintendent Arlene Ackerman after having been embroiled in controversy. For a more information about this Walker, see [http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/15829/class-dismissed](http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/15829/class-dismissed).
recruit teachers and staff who share views similar to hers and who value the school’s African-centered character.

Performing Africa

One of the primary ways that the Minority Group promotes an identity founded upon the idea of Blacks as connected to an African Diasporic identity is through rituals and school practices, some of which have their origin in cultural and religious practices of the Akan ethnic group of Ghana, West Africa. As discussed earlier in Chapter Three, the CCS teachers and students report to the school’s multipurpose room every Monday, to open the week of school as a unified whole, as a community. During this brief program, which lasts for only about 30 minutes, the teachers, staff, students, and parents in attendance sing, recite poems, and make affirmations as a way to collectively affirm their identity as people of African descent, and as a school, a common practice among many independent African-centered schools (Austin 2006). It is also during this time that a school staff member will make announcements and reminders about upcoming field trips, programs, testing, or other important events. At the start of the morning program, an elder, usually the school’s executive director or Nana Laila (who is an Akan priest) will pour libation as a way of honoring Black and African ancestors and acknowledging divine energies who will confer their blessings upon the school-community for the week. After the libation pouring, the attendees recite the litany of songs, chants, and affirmations I discussed previously. With the exception of the libation, teachers are supposed to repeat the morning ritual in their classes the remaining four days of the week.

One of the parents informed me that someone from the Charter School board was once in attendance at a CCS program when libation was poured. The school director was told to cease performing the practice. While present at one of the school programs, the school-community
started as normal, with the singing of Lift Every Voice and Sing (also called the Negro National Anthem). Mama Rakia then came to the front of the room to address the attendees. She began her opening remarks by saying, “We’ve already honored the ancestors by singing the anthem so we will get into our program” (Family Night Program, February 2011). Although the school adhered to the directive issued by the Charter School Board they, through Mama Rakia, still retained a way of acknowledging their connection to the ancestral realm and to Africa through the singing of the Negro National Anthem. Her act of reframing the singing of the National Anthem and verbally connecting it to ancestral reverence served as an act of resistance against the Charter Board and an affirmation of her authority in the space.

Another example of the ritual inspired practices as CCS involved making sacred a hidden alcove in the school that a staff member found not long after they had moved into the newly renovated building the currently occupy. Both Mama Rakia, and Baba Hart told me about this small ceremony they performed with students. Baba Hart explained in our interview, 

We found like a cave in the building and so some of the students and teachers got together and we poured libation and prayed. We made a time capsule and put some items in a bottle, some newspaper clippings and things. The contractors sealed up the hole. So we are here! We are here to stay!

Mama Rakia and Baba Hart, the two “elders” in the school, were the only people to recount that story. In fact, of all the teachers and staff I interviewed, these two, the “village elders” were the only ones who mentioned this ritual. In a sense, these two key figures emerge as the village mama and baba, because they hold the firmest to the vision of CCS as an African-centered space although the reality around them dictates differently. For them, this ritual exemplifies the school’s past and the vision they hoped would continue in the new space: a community of African American families for whom their identity as African descended people is key and who desire an educational experience for their children grounded in that understanding. Through their
discursive work, they both make it glaringly clear that, in its present iteration, this goal has not been realized. Further, Mama Rakia and Baba Bill express their discontent about this circumstance.

**Mamas and Babas**

The acknowledgement of adult women and men as mama and baba, respectively, is another one of the school practices that is derived from African cultural practices. It is also another strategy through which Minority group members connect to the school as an African-centered space. As the views expressed by Mama Gregg and Rayvon attest, this practice and the notion of family and community that it is designed to foster, is valued by some Minority educators and even some students.

Mama Gregg, the upper academy’s English teacher, is the daughter of a well-known Washington, D.C. neighborhood activist who mobilized public housing tenants to transform their community. Having been raised in a context of extended family, and social activism, she feels a strong sense of obligation towards today’s youth, especially her students. She attributes her affinity for CCS to the way in which it mirrors the strong community orientation of her own upbringing. She desires to offer them the same kind of support she feels helped her mature into a professional adult. In the excerpt below, Gregg comments about her affinity for the school, her thoughts about race and Blackness, in particular, and her thoughts about the mama/baba acknowledgment. Mama Gregg passionately expresses her perspective in the following quote:

Blackness is who we are and how we um raise our children and the way, I do think one of the most powerful things in this school that’s like awesome to me and it was amazing to me coming from a school that was a military academy …from that totally Anglo Saxon structure to Community Charter School and The Village [concept] and the Mamas and the Babas and now it’s like, Oh My God! (she laughs) It was amazing! It was something about being called Ms. Gregg versus mama. [Being called] Mama Gregg, it gave me a different perspective, a different feel towards the students. Not to say that I didn’t come
with an innate or already had the commitment but really that was something that was amazing to me.

Mama Gregg reveals in her comments, how this particular African-centered practices reinforces a sense of community and a positive racial identity for her. Although she held these views prior to her employment at the school, since working at CSS, her views have been buoyed by the school’s ideology around the notion of an African community based on an emotional connection to an “African homeland” (Hamilton 2007:19).

**Personal Empowerment**

One way that teachers and staff at CCS characterize African-centeredness is as ideology that contains tenants of personal empowerment such as knowing one’s history, and staying conscious of and engaged in the liberation struggle for the freedom of African people throughout the diaspora. This interpretation of African-centeredness is most similar to Pan Africanists who stressed an African identity and interdependence of peoples of African descent in their collective struggle against oppression (Gomez 2006; Gordon 2003; Harris 2007).

**Mama Kaye**

Mama Kaye, the educational facilitator who helped me coordinate the focus group sessions, expressed her understanding of Afrocentricity in this way. She likened the concept to spirituality, a self-knowing and connection to “God-centeredness.” She conceptualizes African-centeredness is conceptualized as an internal quality. Mama Kaye is an administrator but is among the minority groups of educators who view of CCS as an African-centered space and highly values the school’s African-centered focus.

She spoke of African-centeredness as having the consciousness to honor the scared elements of the school practices such as the morning circle. Mama Kaye expressed these views
in one of the focus groups during which time she admonished the teachers for failing to manage
the student behaviors in the circle and allowing students to be dismissive of it. She spoke of the
morning circle as being “part of the school’s institutional mission” that should be carried out by
teachers. She further criticized teachers for taking a job without fully “buying into” the school’s
mission. She stated, “Kids shouldn’t be leaning in the sacred circle. How it’s brought to the
children isn’t as powerful as it should be. You work with mission and vision. I think that
sometimes the mission is lost in the vision” (Focus Group 1, May 2010). Kaye’s comments
reveal her level of attachment and internalization about African-centeredness as a personal
ideology. Her admonishment of teachers who do not enforce stricter behavior standards upon
students during the circle also shows that not all educators share in her view of African-
centeredness as a salient marker of identity.

Baba Eric

Baba Eric, is the music teacher at CCS. Almost daily, he wore African print shirts and a
kufi (a men’s woven skull cap, often worn by African American Muslims). He instructs students
in the use of African instruments like the cowbell, various drums, and the shekere (a large hand-
held rattle made from a beaded gourd. We chatted one afternoon after I spent some time assisting
him with his class. Many students were particularly restless on this day and I intervened to help
diffuse and re-direct them. It was effective, but only to an extent. After the students were
dismissed, we conversed about a trip he had recently taken to South Carolina for the Gullah
Festival66. He appeared to be disturbed about something and perhaps, while reflecting upon the

66 The Gullah Festival honors the history, culture, and life ways of the descendants of Africans who were
enslaved on the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. Because of their relative isolation from the mainland, the
Gullah people were able to retain many aspects of their African culture. Their lineage has been traced back to ethnic
groups in West Africa, most notably the Mende people of Sierra Leone and the Igbo of Nigeria. For more
information on the Gullah/Geechee people, visit the National Park Service website,
students’ behavior in light of his recent excursion, he became discouraged. The following is an excerpt from our dialogue. When I inquired about rather somber mood, he replied with:

BE: It was just so difficult to see what our ancestors went through and the brutality of the south.
MC: Yes, but we have somehow managed to survive.
BE: Yeah, We’re a strong people.

Baba Eric went on to express how disconnected he thinks young African Americans are from their history and the collective struggle of African American people in the United States.

These kids just don’t get it. They don’t’ grasp the importance of our struggle, the importance of our history. [You can see it in] some of their behaviors, language and mannerisms. They don’t get it, they don’t’ understand what we have been through. Our history [and] how we were treated during enslavement and after (Personal Interview, June 2010).

Baba Eric’s comments suggest that if young African Americans were taught more about the history and brutality of enslavement that it would promote a consciousness and self-awareness within them that would cause them to behave differently. In another discussion with Mama Laila, she expresses the same sentiment. As an Akan priest, she embodies a particular kind of African-centered identity. She remarked how she wished the school had their own African-centered curriculum so students could really learn more about their history. Mama Laila’s son is an actor and had come to D.C. to perform in a play about Black soldiers in the segregated U.S. military. I inquired if any of her students had gone to the play, to which she replied, “No indeed! They have no context [for understanding] what we’ve been through” (Personal communication, May 2010).

Both of these Minority group educators express a disappointment over African American youths’ behavior and the sense of privilege they think young people possess in relationship to the civil rights they enjoy. For both of them, they see an internalization of the struggles and triumphs of the African American history will serve as a moral compass, directing them in demonstrating appropriate behavior and more African-centered identity.
Mama Gregg

Similar to Mama Kaye, Mama Gregg, the Literature teacher in the middle academy, also conceptualizes African-centeredness as an internal and highly personalized quality. In this regard, the mission of CCS is closely aligned with their personal worldview and in some cases, with past experiences.

I bring my Afrocentricity with me. I knew when I pulled up to Mongane Avenue, I knew I was in the inner city and I knew how to service inner city youth. With the history of Bob Marley and Marcus Garvey. I knew that before I got here. That’s what I am in my spirit. It [Afrocentricity] is not always generated from within [the environment]. You have to bring it with you (Personal interview, November 2010).

She explains that her work is much more than a job; for her it is a personal responsibility and a way of life.

Cause I feel a responsibility, I feel responsible, like, maybe it came from the way I was mentored and I was nurtured and developed in my own thinking and my am-ness if there is such a word… There were a lot of people who played a lot of different roles [in my life] and teachers were a part of that. I take full responsibility for our children…This is a part of my village you know. It’s the way I was raised (Personal Interview, November 2010).

Gregg uses inclusive language to talk about the students and the school, CCS. She says she takes responsibility for “our children’ and “this is a part of my village now,” demonstrating her sense of connection to the youth and families at CCS. She readily admits that she strongly identifies with some of the tenets of Afrocentricity, as it is defined by scholars, such as collectivism and family-centeredness (Sefa Dei 1994). Even prior to coming to CCS, she had a greater motivation for being present at the school.

Mama Olu

The Dean of Students, Mama Olu. expressed appreciation around the school’s African-centered feature; she shared with me how this aspect of CCS made the school particularly more

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67 Many CCS teachers and faculty use the term Afrocentricity and African-centeredness interchangeably.
attractive for her. She indicated that she had previously worked for a consulting company that placed counselors at various schools and rehabilitation centers in the D.C. area. Originally from Florida, her parents were local activists and some of the experiences of her youth mirror the practices at CCS. Olu shares her historical connection to the school’s practices, and how she learned about CCS:

And my old boss was like, Olu I think I have this other school for you and she brought me here and I was like "Oh my God, I love this school, oh my God, I love this school.” (Olu becomes very animated while she says this. She talks fast and exudes excitement) And then I met mama Rakia. That was 3 years ago and there were a lot more Afrocentric children here…And then in circle time the kids were singing The Red, Black, and Green song and I started singing it and Mama Rakia was like, “You know that song?” And I said, Yes! We sang it when we were kids (Personal interview, December 2010).

Mama Olu’s comments reveal her level of familiarity with school practices that evolve from Pan Africanist and Black Nationalist thought that inspired the African-centered independent school movement. Her sense of familiarity with the school’s mission and practices underscore her attachment to CCS. The Black and African aesthetics in the school space, the school practices (rituals, adult acknowledgement, and songs) are what drew her to the school and inspired her for affinity for it. This shows the degree to which she values the school as a space that can cultivate within Black children and adults an African-centered identity as a way of a connecting to an African Diaspora. My classroom observations revealed that teachers embody and impart African-centered ideology in varying ways based upon their individual stances.

**African-Centered Pedagogy**

Another way that Minority Group members actualize CCS as an African-centered space, is through their use of an African-centered pedagogical approach in their classrooms. Teachers and staff are free to implement African-centered pedagogy based on how they understand and conceptualize it. Many of the staff members I interviewed expressed very positive views about
he school’s approach to education and seemed to appreciate the cultural aspect of the institution. Unlike many independent African-centered schools, where the entire educational environment is grounded in African-centered ideology, CCS has a rather fragmented approach to African-centered education and identity development. For example, independent (private) schools like those mentioned earlier in this dissertation, design their own curriculum that centralizes African Diasporic history, art, and culture. However, CCS uses a commercial curriculum for most subjects. Yet, teachers can supplement it with materials that reflect African-centered ideology, at their discretion. The school administration incorporates African-centered materials into the staff development sessions to encourage teachers’ use of them in their instructional approaches and content. Mama Kaye, the educational facilitator who coordinates the professional development sessions, said the teachers were reading the work of Africanist educator Jawanzaa Kunjufu, author of *Counter the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, Volume I and II*68. Mama Kaye, also shared that it had taken a while for teachers to “buy into” the school’s African-centered focus, thus revealing, the contested nature around this issue. However, some educators embrace the African-centered educational approach at CCS. Mama Gregg and Mama Laila are two such educators that I highlight here.

**Mama Gregg - African-Centered Literature**

When I told Mama Gregg, about my dissertation topic which was examining Afrocentric education, she enthusiastically and confidently stated, “Oh you have to come to my classroom. That’s all we do, every day” (Personal communication, March 2010). An examination of Mama

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68 Kunjufu’s work exposes the often subtle ways in which teachers and school administrators’ biases towards Black males, borne from racist ideologies, adversely affects Black boys in school and begins a process of their continued alienation and marginalization in society. This is demonstrated by the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education classes, diagnosed with emotional and learning disabilities; high school dropouts, and populating America’s prisons. According to a conversation with the Dean of Students, one of the mandates from the school’s charter board review process was to devise better strategies of addressing the social and emotional needs of Black male students at CCS.
Gregg’s classroom, allows us to see how she attempts to actualize this in her classroom. On the day that I observed her class, Gregg led a discussion and charted the components of a story using the book, *The Dark Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural*, a collection of short stories by African American writer Patricia C. McKissack. The book is based upon historical themes of the American south combined with ghosts, vengeance, and haunting. She divided the students into five small groups, with their desks facing inward so that group members can see one another.

Mama Gregg worked the room like a seasoned performer, moving from group to group asking, probing, and jogging young memories. Several students respond to her questions as she asks about the characters, plot, theme, and other elements of the story. Mama Gregg asks the class to identify the flashback in the story and one student, John, jumps at the chance to respond. He is quite obviously an engaged learner, as he is very participatory throughout the lesson. However, he responds incorrectly to a question, mistaking a key character’s identity for a White man when he is actually Black. When Mama Gregg responds to correct or incorrect answers, she does so with enthusiasm, stimulated by the exchange taking place in the room. In some ways, she resembles a sports team coach, encouraging, challenging, and cajoling students to perform. In doing so, she speaks to the students in a language they understand, interspersing a variety of Black English Vernacular with Standard English, code switching when she thinks it is appropriate. In her employment of this codeswitching strategy, Gregg validates the language and culture of her students. She communicates to them, indirectly, that she is a part of them, while also modeling for them language of the dominant culture, the language of commerce. Linguists

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McKissack explains that the “Dark Thirty” is the last thirty minutes before midnight and is fabled to be a time of mystery, magic, and the supernatural. Southern Black parents implored their children to be inside by 11:30pm to avoid unfavorable encounters with the supernatural world and that of the racist American south.
have suggested that this is an effective pedagogical strategy for use with language minority students, as it affirms students’ home language while building a bridge to the mainstream language (Labov 1969, Leap 1993; Smitherman 2002). Beyond its pedagogical benefits this style of interacting with students also affirms their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity by showing them that their language has a place in institutions of learning and that they can develop fluency in both language styles.

Mama Gregg smiles easily and laughs with students but also firms up when she needs to remind students of her authority, very much like a *mama* would do. For example, when she scolds a 7th grade male for not submitting his homework she says, “You have to come prepared, my brother,” balancing sternness and concern in her comments. Gregg uses the expression, “my brother” to connect with the student through the language of kinship. In this way, she makes her reprimand in the context of familial obligation, inviting the student to meet the expectation she has set for him. Her remark implores the student to step up to the plate and meet his responsibilities to himself as a learner but also to his race and his community as a Black man. As a way of acknowledging the effort of the students, just before class ends, Mama Gregg instructs everyone to get up, and stand away from their seats, and put their arms straight out in front of them. She then invites them to the Dougie, a popular dance in DC and other urban, mostly Black communities. The students laugh with and at Mama Gregg’s pitiful attempt to do the dance. The students do not hesitate in informing Mama Gregg that she still “ain’t got it.”

**Mama Laila**

Mama Laila is an artist, dancer/choreographer, and storyteller, who performs often in the D.C. area. She wears her African identity, and often dresses in African inspired attire, a short-natural haircut, and primarily uses her African spiritual name. Laila is a priestess initiated in the
spiritual traditions of the Akan of Ghana, West Africa, and incorporates African-centered content in her integrated instruction of music, dance, writing, and history. I observed her lead some of her primary grade students in a call and response song one afternoon,

All over Africa (students repeat each line)  
So many people  
Some cook on open fires  
Some cook with microwaves  
Some live in village houses  
Some live in apartment buildings  
Some drive fancy cars  
Some drive pick-up trucks  
Some work on farms and fields  
Some work in banks and stores  
So many tribes and people  
All over Africa

Laila uses songs and poems to counter negative depictions of Africa. She is vigilant about presenting a contemporary and de-colonized view of the African continent, which challenges the stereotypical images of the continent as primitive, and continent that civilization and technology have left behind. The song counters these depictions of African by showing students that Africans have lifestyles similar to their own. Some of Mama Laila’s other activities include instruction about Adinkra symbols, African textiles, and West African dance. With the middle aged female students, she facilitated a “Queens of Africa” showcase in which each young girl studied the biography of an African Queen and then dressed in African clothes. Similar to a beauty queen contest format, students presented the historical data on their queen and modeled their royal attire.

This classroom exchange shows that CCS, African-centered education is participatory and engaging, and informed by students’ lived experience which can include their language, interaction styles, music, and dance styles; as well as issues young people themselves care about. These various features all have implications for students’ African-centered identity development
and how they experience themselves as belonging to an extended African, as Black, community (Shockley 2011; Shujaa 1996). African-centeredness is about fostering students’ sense of themselves as being connected to family, community, and a race of people with a lineage that is rooted in Africa. Teachers are also part of the larger Black family and thus, the classroom interaction is one that promotes connection between teachers and students.

**Baba Jomo, Minority Group Outlier**

For some, education and practices at CCS were too Black, while for others, it was not Black enough. Although he represented a minority perspective among those that I interviewed, Baba Jomo, a science teacher at CCS, offered a compelling critique of CCS which I thought was important to share. He is from an east coast metropolitan area and has had extensive involvement with independent African-centered education, having taught previously at a school that was founded in the 1970’s by Black nationalists. Like the other Minority Educators, his lifestyle is deeply embedded in other African-centered communities. This excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates his level of immersion in African-centered communities in D.C. and also provides a glance into his views about CCS:

> Today I met Bab Jomo … He wore a necklace of small red and white spiritual beads and a thin, linked metal chain, which I recognized from other practitioners of African spiritual systems (Akan and Yoruba). He also wore an African print shirt and I spoke to him after he clocked out for the day. He asked if I was a parent and I told him no and that I was conducting research on culturally-relevant education, to which he replied, how do you define that? I knew from his question that he had some familiarity with the concept or something similar to it. I told him about Ladson-Billings’s definition of CRP. He said that many schools have the aesthetic [of African-centered schooling] but not the substance, the core of African-centered schooling. I asked him if that was the case here and he said yes. I was surprised that he was so candid in the main office, a rather public place where teachers and students can freely enter. (Fieldnotes, May 2010)

In our interview, I learned that Jomo had only been at CCS for two years but that he was leaving the school, resigning at the end of the school year. He attributed his departure to ideological and
personality differences with the school’s founder and executive director. He chose not to expose the genesis of their conflict, but felt that conditions had worsened after he informed the director in March that he would not be returning the following school year.

He questioned the administration’s commitment to the principles of African-centered education and asserted that the school was only African-centered in its aesthetics. Jomo expressed that the principles that constitute the basis of African-centered schools, called the Nguzo Saba or the Seven Principles of Blackness, were not being adhered to. This, he found problematic. He questioned the ability of a charter school, which answers to the charter school board and must follow the mandates of NCLB, to implement what he would consider “authentic” African-centered education. As his comments below suggest, Jomo believed that it was money, not a commitment to principles of Pan Africanism or Black Nationalism that really influenced the culture at CCS.

This is not an independent school and so the culture that runs the school is the money. The only way to get money is to pass the standardized tests. So that is the culture that runs the school. You can’t have real African-centered education if you aren’t controlling the money (Personal Interview, April 2010).

Jomo is expressing the quandary he sees around the independent, radical thrust of the traditional African-centered schools movement and the conservative, capitalistic temperament of education reform and the charter schools movement. In order for charter schools to remain open, they must adhere to the NCB achievement frame. NCLB law only funds schools if students are performing well on the standardized tests and making annual yearly progress (AYP), as mandated by NCLB law. Schools that fail to adhere to the standards of NCLB, are labeled failing schools in which case all of the teaching staff could be terminated and the school could be

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70 The Nguzo Saba is Swahili for “seven principles.” Kwanzaa creator, Malauna Karenga identified a principle that Kwanzaa celebrants would focus on for each of the seven days of Kwanzaa. The principles are aimed to help Black for
closed. Thus, as Jomo sees it, the educational environment is dictated by the NCLB law, and not the spirit of liberation and African unity that spawned the independent schools of the 1960’s.

Surprisingly, Jomo said he would not be seeking employment at another African-centered school in the area. He felt that the politics behind African-centered education, and the commitment to it, had waned. He asserted, “This isn’t the 1960’s and 70’s. Times are different. People aren’t reading Malcolm X and Stokley Carmichael. The whole political climate is different now,” he explained during our talk. Jomo’s comments illustrate the symbiotic relationship between social movements and the political climate within which they emerge.

Although today’s African-centered public charter schools are contemporary iterations of the Black Power era that created independent schools, today’s political and social climate is afield from the radical 1960’s. Jomo’s comment calls into question the relevance of African-centered education in today’s climate of neoliberalism and globalization. In a conversation with Mama Iman, a thirty-something mother of two children who attend an independent African-centered school, she stated that her children would soon be taking Mandarin. China is one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world (U.S. State Department 2012). The decision for her children to learn China’s main language illustrates the influence of the global market within the context of African-centered education and African-centered identity.

Interestingly, scholars of education have expressed views similar to Baba Jomo’s (Ravitch 2010; Hursch and Camillle 2003; Darling-Hammond 2007). However, his perspective is so compelling because he adds to the dialogue of inequality, the issue of Black resistance against oppression and hegemony. The capitalist and neoliberal tone of NCLB is a particular problematic because it stand in direct opposition to the African liberation ideology, which Jomo is most intimately familiar. Although some African American activists have used the charter
school model to attempt to advance a modern version of African-centered education, as Baba Jomo points out, they represent two competing philosophies where “success” can only be realized if a school yields its progressive, political and stance. This, they are unlikely to do because they are economically reliant upon the hegemonic power structure. As he sees it, only independent schools can truly advance African-centered education. Baba Jomo and Mama Iman’s perspectives reflect an ongoing conversation occurring within African-centered communities which has to do with how African Americans continue to make this type of educational experience relevant and competitive in today’s global economy. Further, this issue also signifies a consideration of how African Americans see themselves as functioning within an increasingly globalized, and hegemonic world.

Minority Group Parents

Mama Kofa – Intergenerational African-Centeredness

Mama Kofa is from an intergenerational African-centered family, where her father, she, and her children have been intensively involved with African-centered religious and political communities for three generations. She was born in an eastern metropolitan area but has lived in Washington, DC, for a number of years. Of all the parents I interviewed, Mama Kofa was the only one who had experienced African-centered schooling directly, as a student. She attended Ujamaa Shule, in Washington, D.C., the oldest Independent Black school in the country. Kofa is a 46 year old, Akan priestess, an initiated practitioner, and she belongs to a local shrine, or African spiritual house where members gather for prayer and spiritual/religious service. Having grown up during the Black Power of the late 1960’s, the tenants of Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism are second nature to her. Her parents were very actively involved Black Power communities in Washington, DC and other east coast cities.
Kofa learned about CCS through someone in the “cultural community,” a term she uses frequently throughout our interview, to refer to the African-centered communities in D.C. (Personal interview, April 2010). I often hear individuals within African-centered groups (religious, political, cultural, etc.) speak of “the community” in a uniform way, although there is great variation in how they identify as African descended people. Such groups also vary in the extent of their involvement with other Africa Diasporic groups. Hamilton (2007) notes the tendency to use unifying language when referencing such groups is an attempt to project an image of solidarity and imagined community among peoples of the African Diaspora, even if that solidarity does not exist. Kofa’s use of the expression “cultural community,” is revealing however, as it indicates the extent to which she internalizes a notion of solidarity among African descended people and also how highly she regards her particular expression of African-centered identity.

Kofa is rearing her children in the manner in which she was raised. She and her husband, and extended family, are rearing their children to subscribe to a philosophy of Pan Africanism, which for her, stresses the connectedness of African peoples throughout the diaspora and collective struggle for African liberation. All of her children have West African names and practice the West African religious system that she and her father practice. Her sons play West African drums and are also skilled in other forms of artistic and cultural expression. Her oldest son and two daughters have been through rites of passage programs which are African American adaptations of socialization rituals for African youth (Warlfield-Coppock 1992). When exploring school options, Kofa said she was attracted to CCS because of its similarities to Ujamma Shule, where she attended school. Yet, the similarities she notes between the two environments are mostly performative aspects of culture. For examples, Kofa expressed
appreciation for the mama and baba acknowledgement; the Red, Black, and Green song; the positive affirmations, and the presence of African art and images that reflect Black culture throughout the school building, and in the school newsletter. She also appreciates the fact that children are exposed to African history and Black cultural information throughout the school year and not only during Black history month as they would in public schools. As an example, she proudly shares how her son Hakhi taught her about an African American inventor whom she wasn’t aware of, Garret P. Morgan, who created the first prototype for the gas mask and street light. Yet, as this research shows, the presence of similar practices in African-centered environments does not always indicate a shared understanding around those practices or the ideology that informs them. Despite this, parents who desire an African-centered learning environment for their children, see these similarities as some evidence of investment in African-centered ideas.

Kofa is also pleased with the teachers; she particularly praised Mama Gregg, the social studies teacher, for fostering her son’s love of reading. She felt that Mama Gregg was able to connect with Hakhi in a way that she had been unable to, and by encouraging him to read books he liked, she surmises, turned him into a “reader,” a teen who now sees reading as a joyful experience rather than an unpleasant chore. Kofa described her oldest son Hahki, who was completing his last year at CCS in June, as mostly quiet and rather shy. Yet, she added, he has found a home and place of belonging at CCS. She observes that most of the students and families at the school do not share her cultural or religious background but because of the school’s Afrocentric focus, they are more open to certain things than perhaps other students might be. All of Kofa’s children have African names, a characteristic which can alienate a young teen among his peers. Yet, Kofa notes that Hakhi enjoys his friends and “they don’t tease him about his name.

For more information on Garret P. Morgan and other African American inventors, C.R. Gibbs
because they know it’s an African name” (Personal Interview, April 2010). Although some teachers at CCS criticize the school for not being progressive enough in its teaching and practices of Afrocentricity, the exposure to African history, customs, and art forms, that CCS provides is likely more than what most students and families would receive if they were part of a traditional public or charter school community that did not have an Afrocentric focus.

Mama Kofa beams when she shares that Hahki, performed as the masqueraded stilt-walker at a recent school program. Among some African ethnic groups, the identity of the stilt walker remains unknown. However, as Mama Kofa says, Hakhi gave a teacher permission to reveal his identity to the students. She credits the school with transforming her son’s shyness and helping him mature as young man and student. Although she has been pleased with CCS, both of her sons will be transitioning out of the school. Hakhi, who graduates in June 2010, was enrolling in a technical high school for the Fall 2011 and his mother was strongly considering transferring her youngest son to an arts-based, but not African-centered, charter school to develop his capabilities in music.

Mama Elaine

Mama Elaine is a very active parent at CCS; I would often see her volunteering in the cafeteria or in a classroom. She was at the school with such regularity that for some time I thought she worked there. Mama Elaine describes herself as a Pan Africanist and revealed in our interview how disheartened she was that the school did not have a more rigorous cultural focus. She acknowledged the teachers that tried to offer more substantive exposure to African history and culture, particularly the creative arts and the music teacher, but she also recognized that as an institution CCS was “controlled by the government,” and I could not be as “revolutionary as the private African-centered schools he had once patronized. Elaine and her husband have three
daughters, 21, 14, and 7. The oldest one two attended independent African-centered schools in the past, but current financial. She noted that not all teachers incorporated African-centered pedagogy into their classes, and because of this, Elaine called the school’s African-centered environment “superficial” (Personal Interview, January 2010). Because of this, she and her husband supplement their two daughters’ education through exposure to various books, films, lectures and Black cultural events around town. Based on the types of educational resources she exposed her children to, Mama Elaine seemed to promote critical thinking and independence for her daughters. She points out her teen daughter’s decision to become a vegetarian as evidence of her success in raising independent thinking children.

Mama Elaine shared other concerns she had about Community Academy. She mentioned at least twice during our interview, how frequently students’ behavior problems disrupted teaching and learning. She felt that teachers spent an inordinate amount of time disciplining students that detracted from valuable instructional time. She commented that in her observations of classrooms, many students seem unable to sit still for instruction and that a better screening and admissions process, would allow the school to be more selective and discerning of students who might have behavior problems. What Mama Elaine argues for is a competitive, selective process which runs counter to African-centered ideology whose focus, at least in part, is on collective work and responsibility and cooperativeness over competitiveness. This theme of “selection” is one that I will return in the Chapter 6 in the Discussion of the findings. It is a theme that other faculty and staff have mentioned and appears to be viewed as an antidote to some of the problems CCS currently faces.

For these two Minority Group parents, Mama Kofa and Mama Elaine, CCS’s African-centered feature was of primary importance. Both had prior exposure to independent African-
centered schools and had previously enrolled their children in these schools in the DC area. However, financial constraints precluded them from being able to patronize those institutions presently. Like Mama Kofa, Mama Elaine admits that if finances were not a concern, her children would likely be attending a private African-centered school. At the time of our interview, Mama Elaine was waiting to start a new job and her husband’s employment provided the family’s only income. Thus, tuition at private African-centered schools was prohibitive. For her, CCS was a sound alternative as a public school that provided the cultural and historical focus that she valued.

Although these two families highly value African-centered schools and spaces that promote an African-centered identity, economic concerns factor into their patronization of CCS and in a larger sense their consumption of African-centered experiences and goods. Although independent African-centered, according to Elaine, have a more rigorous cultural and political focus, they were not without flaws. Mama Elaine voiced a critically important issue in our interview, stating that she was aware that corporal punishment techniques were used at one school which she found problematic. She further said that such practices were “ok for boys because but can be little rough on the girls” (Personal Interview, December 2010). Mama Elaine’s observation speaks directly to Annette Henry’s work (1998), which urges educators, parents, and scholars to critically examine these leaning environments, giving particular attention to how girls, and I would argue all students, are negotiating issues of gender and sexuality, and also safety, within these schools. While I am certainly not implicating all African-centered schools, it is broadly known that many such schools are closely aligned with Black Nationalist ideologies. Numerous feminist and Black womanist scholars have (Collins 1989, hooks 2001; Mullings 2000) critiqued these ideologies as male-centered and oppressive against Black women,
men, and families. As African Americans continue to rearticulate African-centered education, these schools warrant our critical engagement.

**Group II - Majority Educators and Parents**

The second constituent group at CCS assigns less value to the African-centered aspect of the school and in fact, some teachers within this group see it as disadvantageous to students. These majority educators also expressed tension around the school’s collective practices, revealing how they inconsistently implement the practices in their classroom. These educators voiced greater concern about the school’s educational program and were more cognizant of the socioeconomic needs of families that precluded them from being fully invested in their education.

Majority group teachers were not totally opposed to the African-centered practices at the school. They simply felt that other concerns were a greater priority. For example, Baba Harlan, a teacher in the lower academy, said the songs and chants were “good and culturally relevant” but had also become routine and meaningless to his young students. Another male teacher expressed appreciation for the school’s observation of Black cultural holidays, like Black Love Day and Kwanzaa, in particular, because it exposed the students to things they might not see on television or encounter in the mainstream media. However, majority teachers considered these practices as superficial and of limited impact. In their assessment, the school leadership inadequately conveyed their cultural or historical significance. Thus, teachers confessed that they inconsistently implemented the practices that Mama Rakia expected them to do in their classes four days per week. This view is reflected in Baba John’s comment below:

They [the affirmations] are helpful and important. It could be beneficial… I don’t think the school as a whole has [explained] enough [the] reasons as to why [the practices exist] . . . To explain to the kids [why these things] are done. Kids would take more pride if
they are given the history of it but they’re not given the whole history (Teachers Focus Group 3, May 2010).

Other teachers revealed that they either skipped or abbreviated the morning ritual so they can dive into the instruction for the day. They stated that given the various demands of their day -- addressing students’ academic deficiencies, tending to student behavioral problems, and responding to administrative demands -- enforcing the morning ritual was a lower priority. As noted in the comment above, many teachers thought that the importance of the morning practice was not fully articulated by the school leadership and hence, they assigned little value to it.

Underlying these varying explanations is tension between the school’s leadership and the teachers that gets played out in the classroom. This tension fuels the disconnect between the leadership’s vision of an African-centered learning environment and teachers’ implementation of that vision.

I attribute some of this tension to conflicts around conflicting gender expectations on behalf of teachers and staff. Although women predominate in the teaching profession, they are still underrepresented among positions of school leadership. School principals tend to be men, for whom the instrumental characteristics associated with good leadership — confidence, assertiveness, directness — are more socially acceptable. Mama Rakia is not only the Executive Director of and principal of CCS, she is the founder of the school and thus, holds a tremendous amount of power and investment in the school’s success. As director of the school and the one who is most responsible for “keeping the doors open,” as she says, she faces an inordinate amount of pressure to excel.

Many of the complaints and tensions I observed from teachers and staff at CCS were in relation to her leadership style and demanding personality. Some teachers even complained that she was rude and dismissive of parents. Although limited, my only evidence of gender tensions,
comes from observing the types of exchanges that occurred on the school’s electronic mail system. I was given a school email address to facilitate communication with parents of the teens I worked with and also to help me become immersed in the school culture. I observed that it was only on very rare occasions that teachers communicated using this medium and rarer still, that they initiated communication with their colleagues through the email system. The school email was primarily used by Mama Rakia and functioned as a platform through which she, and on occasion, the administrators close to her: the Dean of Students, Vice Principal, and Parent Coordinator, communicated with others in the school. Most of her communications contained information on classroom teaching strategies, classroom evaluations; administrative/recordkeeping requirements; and personal and professional development opportunities. Many of the community events announcements were invitations to lectures and programs sponsored by African-centered people or institutions. Mama Rakia’s strong sense of ownership over CCS, in my estimation, was a major source of contention within the school that ignited discord and adversely impacted teacher and staff’s receptivity to Rakia’s vision of CCS as an African-centered space and site of African Diasporic identity.

Baba Lamar

Some Majority group educators held oppositional views about the school’s African-centered approaches. Several of the middle and upper academy teachers expressed that view that the school’s African-centered environment was idealistic and a disservice to youth, as they felt it did not prepare them for what they will face in the “real world” (Teacher focus group 3, May 2010). Baba Lamar, anxious to share his thoughts about African-centered education, spoke most strongly about this point in our interview and the focus group. I conducted three observations in his classroom, which he operated like a machine. He has taught at CCS for seven years and was
clearly one of the most talented and well-liked educators in the school. Baba Lamar, who is in his mid-thirties, was noted for his youthful energy and had managed to balance his ability to interact casually with students, discussing hip-hop music, fashion, sports, and current events, while also maintaining his stance as the authority and educator in the classroom.

In the interview and again in the focus group, Lamar shared his belief that the school sets up “false expectations for students.” Interestingly, he compared the dynamics at CCS with his experience attending a predominantly Black university in the southeastern region of the U.S. Supporters of Historically black Colleges and universities (HBCU’s) often cite how nurturing these environments are for Black students. And alumni have many stories about discipline. Lamar expressed that CCS could improve in preparing kids for what they will face in the “real world,” meaning the competitiveness, confidence, and skills required to succeed in the workforce or higher education. Select teachers felt that the leniency and nurturing that students received at CCS did not encourage students to be fortuitous and hardworking. It did not challenge students. Further, he stated that the school should help students understand that low status of Blacks in America and impress upon them the necessity of hard work and responsibility because no one is going to “hook you up” with a passing grade.

To an extent, Lamar thinks the school’s family-friendly environment disserves students. Particularly, he thinks the school is too permissive of inappropriate student behavior. He attributes the school’s relaxed stance to their need to Although he understands that the use of mama and baba to address adults in the school embodies the family centered environment that the school tries to promote, he also believes works against students because they have to re-adjust to using Mr. and Mrs. after they leave CCS. While this language shift may seem minor, Lamar thinks it is indicative of a larger shift students must make and one for which they are ill
prepared: learning how to function within a larger, more diverse, and more competitive environment. Few CCS graduates go on to attend African-centered high schools (the only ones in DC are private and charge tuition). Lamar disappointedly stated, “they [CCS graduates] go to new schools and have to adjust to calling teachers different names. Sometimes they fall behind on the academic demands of larger schools that are less family friendly and accommodating” (Interview, June 2009).

**Mama Shaylah**

Mama Shaylah, the upper academy science teacher, expressed a similar position. She believed that the school did not adequately teach students when to code switch between their local culture – dialect, way of dressing, and interacting-- and the dominant culture. Mama Penn too shared her concern about the lack of code switching and worried that students would not adjust to a non-African-centered environment.

They are going into multicultural environments. [They need to] be smart enough to know. This is not an Afrocentric world. Their first job may not come from a black person. Empower them [to know] when to use their Black English. You don’t have to change who you are. Know when to use it and when not to use it (Teacher Focus Group 1, May 2010).

Mama Shaylah, was especially concerned that Black boys were being disadvantaged in this regard and as such would continue to face stereotypes and lack of opportunity beyond the confines of CCS. In the focus groups, teachers elaborated on this point and discussed how CCS youth did not know how to “respond” to other people and situations, particularly white people. Two teachers shared instances when their students acted awkwardly in the presence of Whites. Mama Shayla noted an instance where an outside evaluator, who was white, visited the school and sat in on her classroom. She said the students exhibited a “nervous kind of energy” in response to the White evaluator. Although the students’ nervousness could have been a result of
being observed by an outsider, it is interesting that this educator views this dynamic only through the lens of race. She noted that the students were unusually quiet and clammed up, unsure of how to express themselves around whites. Some teachers partially attribute students’ discomfort around the “other” to the school’s Black focused cultural feature and also the students’ extremely limited exposure to whites and others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many teachers, saw this as crippling and disadvantageous to students.

In addition, several of the lower academy teachers expressed concerns about the challenges that precluded their young learners from performing well in school. A group of six teachers, who comprised the participants in the third focus group, spoke extensively about the socioeconomic challenges in students’ homes that manifest in their school behavior and academic performance. Teachers complained about the widespread lack of school readiness skills: letter recognition, name identification, and phonemic awareness, among their young pre-school aged students. They also spoke of the constant behavior problems they had to address in the classroom that detracted from their ability to maximize “time on tasks” that advanced student learning.

Teachers also spoke of the lack of parental support in some students’ lives, a factor which directly impacts children’s learning and their ability to move forward into more complex skills. They mentioned parents who are uninvolved, uneducated themselves and unable or unwilling to support their children and while they empathized with some parents’ situation, some still felt the school needed to raise the standards for parents. Teachers attributed this gap in expectations versus outcomes to the immaturity and youthfulness of parents. Baba Hart, who is the only remaining founding teacher on staff, harshly criticized parents whom he felt lacked basic skills in
supporting their children and whose instability made it difficult for their children to succeed in school.

Teachers came from different backgrounds and had varying socialization experiences themselves. These differences informed how they interacted with the students and how they perceived the utility of an African-centered learning environment like CCS. Due to these multiple perspectives, teachers approached the education of Black children in different ways. They imparted to students, through their classroom interactions and instruction, what they individually deemed was necessary for students’ educational and personal development.

Several teachers indicated that they had attended racially integrated schools and thought that such environments offered a more realistic representation of the world. The all Black school environment, coupled with the Back cultural focus of CCS, according to some teachers, was limiting and kept students isolated in an unrealistic “Black reality.” One teacher expresses this perspective by sharing, “I wasn’t taught by all Black teachers. My mother always taught me how I speak at home is not how we speak when you are outside the house.” This teacher’s comment illustrates her stance on the extent to which to Blacks should assimilate and how they should conduct themselves beyond spaces where Blacks predominate.

Majority Parents

Parents in this category spoke of the school’s family friendly environment and how it gave them feelings of comfort and a sense of community. While parents in the Majority group were not opposed to the African-centered feature of CCS, they attached greater significance to the school’s family-centered focus, convenience, and family support resources. While they may have appreciated the school’s African-centered aspects, it did not constitute the core of their attachment to the school. Mama Neal and Mama Brown were two single parents I interviewed
who represented this perspective. Both women were employed at the school and also had children, and other family (nieces and nephews), and fictive kin (godchildren), enrolled at the school. Families in this category were not involved in African-centered communities outside of CCS. Their involvement in the school’s rituals and programs that are grounded in African religious practices and ideology constitutes their only involvement in such ways of expression. The majority of the families at CCS are among this constituency. I highlight four families here as being representative of this category of families.

The Neals

Mama Neal is the first CCS staff person most visitors see upon entering the school, after signing in at the security station at the entrance. Mama Neal is the attendance monitor and front desk receptionist in the main office. She learned about the school from a friend whose children were enrolled in the school. When I asked what attracted her to the school she replied, “When I came for orientation, everybody was just so nice. It just felt like home, like a family and I wanted to be a part of it.” (Personal communication, May 2010). Word of mouth was a common way that families learn about CCS, although the CCS Parent Coordinator, who is responsible for school recruitment, and often speaks at community events to promote the school. During my regular visits to the school, I would often see CCS yard signs posted in the small lawns of houses.

Mama Neal started as the bus attendant, a job now held by Mama Caroline, another CCS parent. Her entry into the job was made possible through the Welfare to Work Program, which requires parents receiving public assistance to work or pursue job training as a way of attaining self-sufficiency. Later, Mama Rakia, the school’s founder and executive director approached her about the office assistant position, where she has now worked for six years. She shared in our
interview that she has two children and a nephew enrolled at CCS. Godchildren and relatives had also previously attended the school. Mama Neal is a staple at CCS and her familiarity with the families is obvious. As parents report to pick up their children at the end of the day, she knows immediately which children belong with which parents. She often refers to parents by name and efficiently announces over the school’s public announcement system the names of children who are to report to the office for dismissal and pick up. Mama Neal wears multiple hats and as the only full-time, permanent front office worker, she is constantly busy. Her love for her work though is apparent, as she enthusiastically executes her duties and is rarely absent from work. Mama Neal is not involved in any African-centered organizations beyond CCS. She is a working-class, single mother whom takes public transportation to and from the school. I would often see her at the bus top near the school at the end of her workday.

Mama Monroe

Mama Monroe is also employed by the school as the school bus attendant. CCS has one small and two regular sizes school buses that pick up children from designated sites in the neighborhoods surrounding the school such as the Trinidad neighborhood, Ivy City, and Massachusetts Avenue. I later learned from Baba Raymond, the school bus driver, that a homeless family that resides in a southeast shelter also relies on the school’s transportation services. As bus attendant, Mama Monroe makes sure that students are seated and mannerly on the bus. She alights at every stop to escort students onto the bus and makes sure they get off at their appropriate stop.

Mama Monroe has a very firm look and I did not expect her to be open to an interview. However, when I asked her, she gladly obliged. We spent over an hour together in the small room on the second floor of the school that was designated as the Parenting Resource Center.
This is typically where Mama Monroe spends her days between the morning and afternoon bus runs. She was slightly tardy for our scheduled interview and explained that her delay was due to a fatal accident involving a four year old that attempted to cross an intersection in her neighborhood. Perhaps the somberness of the events prompted us both to reflect upon the blessing of children. We both shared accounts of fertility troubles, motherhood, and the joy that our children brought to our lives. This personal encounter typifies the level of familiarity and closeness that seems to exist among many of the CCS teachers and staff.

Mama Monroe’s son and nephew were enrolled at CCS prior to my data collection period. The nephew, who participated in the youth program I later directed, now attends a public charter middle school not very far from CCS. Mama Monroe had her son transferred to another school, not because she was displeased with the school’s performance, but rather because it could not accommodate his special learning needs as outlined in his Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). She credits one of the school’s former teachers with helping her access a private school in Silver Spring, Maryland, where her son is now enrolled and with which she is very pleased. Mama Monroe calls Community Charter a “family school” because of its family-like atmosphere and because so many families with multiple children are enrolled in the school. She expressed that her appeal to the school was due to the “family feel, the love, and the supportive environment” (Personal Interview, June 2010). She said that her son, who was a student there for three years, really enjoyed the school’s African-centered features and that she herself has learned a lot about Black heritage from being at the school—particularly, Black Love Day and the African American cultural celebration of Kwanzaa. However, she also added that her family had not adopted any of these practices at home although they participate in school programs held to commemorate these days.
During our second interview, Mama Monroe spoke about the class and economic dimensions of CCS families. In her assessment, many CCS take the bus service for granted. For example, the bus provides transportation after special events and the aftercare program which ends at 6:00pm. This, Mama Monroe expressed, discourages parents from attending programs and involving themselves in school activities because they know their kids will be safely transported home. This class-based critique of parent behavior is one of many such statements I heard offered by educators and staff at CCS. I will expound upon the significance of these comments in the next chapter of this dissertation. Mama Monroe also talked about how these class dynamics unfold in her work, her personal life, and how she tries to negotiate them. She spoke of an instance in which her son was accused of “being better” because he “got new shoes every week.” Although an exaggeration, the comment reflects the advantage that Mama Monroe experiences as a result of her employment at CCS and how this information impacts interaction between individuals in the school. She then shared an account of a boy who rode the school bus who would often come to school out of uniform. When she inquired with the boy, he told her that his uniforms were all dirty. Monroe speaks in our interview, of how she tries to negotiate this dynamic. In her own words she says,

Mama Neal [the attendance monitor] would usually send students back home for not being in uniform but I talked to her. Later on, I looked through my son’s old things and found some uniforms so I put a note on them with my phone number and gave them to the boy. His mother said he could accept them. I felt bad that I couldn’t do more for the other kids. There are three in total but at least I was able to do something for the one boy (Personal Interview, June 2010).

Mama Monroe interacts with many parents and children which affords her a glimpse into their realities. She is aware of the poverty and challenging conditions of many students’ lives. Curiously, her actions serve as an acknowledgement of her sense of identification with other CCS parents, the same parents she criticizes earlier for their irresponsibility. Yet, her gesture also
serves as a testament to her slight advantage over other CCS parents. She tries to negotiate and perhaps justify her class positioning by helping out another family, perhaps to show that she and her sons are not better than other CCS families. Yet, this class position becomes tenuous when in a later interview; Mama Monroe reveals her job insecurity and subsequent material and emotional vulnerability.

Mama Monroe acknowledges the benefits of her job at CCS. She cares for her ailing mother and her position, with the lengthy break between the morning and afternoon bus runs, allow her to check on her mom and prepare her meals. While she expressed appreciation for the job, Mama Monroe also aspires for more. She shared with me her despair at being unable to find full time employment. She was particularly disappointed that she had not been considered for three different full time jobs at CCS for which she has applied over the last six years. She thought that the school leadership had intentionally “overlooked” her for other positions at the school, the most recent one being a cafeteria attendant position. This disappointment, invariably, affected her feelings about the school and the “family-like” atmosphere she spoke of so highly in our earlier interview. She intimates her feelings of betrayal after learning that she did not get the cafeteria attendant job. The comments below are a direct quote from Mama Monroe,

That was the straw the broke the camel’s back. I don’t even like coming here no more but I have two boys to feed. My twelve year old asked me the other day, “Ma, are you depressed?” He said, “Ma, don’t be depressed cause you all I got. You and grandma”. I told him,”Naw, I’m not depressed” (Personal interview, September 2009).

For this single parent, CCS was more than a school for her children but a place that offered the possibility of upward mobility – a chance to alter the material and even social reality of her life. Mama Monroe’s comments illustrate the tenuousness of that future when events don’t unfold as she preferred. In this instance, CCS changes from a family-friendly resource to another institution that disappoints the families and community members they are meant to serve.
Remembering how important her faith was to her, I encouraged Mama Monroe to keep her options open and apply for jobs beyond CCS. She seems to appreciate the encouragement, sharing with me that her background is in special police enforcement and that she is applying for security officer jobs, among others. She responds with, “My fiancé told me to just stop working but I can’t do that. I’m independent. I know I’mma get something when the time is right. I know God got me” (Personal Communication, September 2010).

The Zatras

The Zatras are another example of a family who prioritizes CCS for its family services. I interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Zatra separately, as the couple maintained separate residences. They had slightly different perspectives about CCS but both spoke of the school’s convenience, lack of tuition since it is a public school, and academic program as attractive features. Two other considerations factored into Mr. and Mrs. Zatra’s decision to enroll their children at CCS; displeasure with their special needs son’s lack of academic progress at his prior school, and a free summer program at CCS open to children, irrespective of where they reside.

Mr. Zatra had some involvement in other African-centered organizations in the D.C. area. His introduction to the school occurred through Mama Rakia, who often operates in an unofficial capacity as school recruiter. He expressed in our interview, the importance for African American children to gain exposure to the “contributions Africans have made to America.” He also attributes an African-centered educational environment to fostering a more “liberating perspective that teaches children to think radically [critically]” (Personal Interview, February 2010). Although he had some involvement with African-centered religious and cultural groups in D.C., this involvement was minimal.
Mrs. Zatra’s appeal to CCS is the school’s academic program and its proximity to her house which is within walking distance to the school. She shared that she had some familiarity with the school’s African-centered practices, as her parents were missionaries in Ghana, West Africa. Consequently, she had some prior knowledge about the school’s practices that were inspired by Ghanaian culture and language (Twi), although these practices are not part of her life. Mrs. Zatra is a former real estate agent who has been negatively impacted by the economic recession of 2008. Her children utilize the afterschool program and its tutorial services at CCS. Although she is able to assist them, she says that the demands of her schedule and reestablishing her business preclude her from spending much time with her children on homework and school projects. She thinks the services the school offers are valuable but she expresses concern over the school’s constant obsession over the standardized test they are required to take under NCLB law. She expresses concern that the constant focus on test taking compromises the school’s other programs and areas of instruction.

The Wilsons

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson are very active and thus, visible CCS parents. I met the couple at one of the school’s Parent Empowerment Sessions on Discipline vs. Punishment, which was held in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. I met Mrs. Wilson again on a Saturday field trip to a museum, which we both chaperoned. They would often attend the cultural and other school programs at CCS, where Mr. Wilson would often video record the program. He would occasionally come to school wearing his blue utility workers uniform, which he wore at the parent workshop. The couple’s constant presence at the school, I surmised, was a reflection of their investment in their children’s education. Thus, I thought they would make excellent interview candidates.
The Wilsons have two children enrolled in CCS, a son in 4th grade and a daughter in Kindergarten. This was also the family’s first year at the school. I met with them in their home just before school dismissed for the winter break in 2010. We sat at the dining table to have our discussion, and although both parents were present, Mrs. Wilson was much more vocal. The family learned about the school from some of the literature that had been circulating in their neighborhood. Mrs. Wilson said she noticed an announcement in the community newspaper and decided to investigate the school. The children were previously enrolled in a private Christian school in Maryland where Mrs. Wilson taught Spanish. When the job terminated, the couple needed to find another school for the children. She and her husband found several things about CCS appealing among them, the school’s success at making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in Reading during the 2008 – 2009 academic year. CCS is not very far from where the family lives so having a neighborhood school with the credential of having made AYP was a significant achievement. The Wilsons also said they like the school’s High Five program, a behavior intervention model that targets five key areas: service, respect, excellence, community, and honesty. Mrs. Wilson also said she really liked the daily affirmations and songs the children sing, particularly the “Stayed on Freedom” song which she believed, reinforced an important reality for children and adults alike and that is, “anything worth having is unlikely to be given to you.”

In terms of the school’s African-centered feature Mrs. Wilson, who is from Charles County, Maryland, said that the Black cultural focus was not a part of her upbringing and the cultural feature of the school was a definite draw for her. Her husband who is a native Washingtonian agreed saying that “we [students] got the usual [information] on Martin Luther King, Jr. during Black History month and maybe a little Harriet Tubman and Madame C.J. Walker but nothing to the extent that they [children] get it at CCS.” Mrs. Wilson enthusiastically
added, “and then it [the information] was only Black history, it was never traced back to Africa” (Personal Interview, December 2010).

Mrs. Wilson believes the education and exposure her children receive at CCS will help them understand the racist and prejudicial behavior they might encounter in the world. She explained that, “what the school teaches about Blackness is not contrary to what we teach or value although we don’t do a sit down regimented lesson. “ (Personal Interview, December 24, 2010). Rather, Mrs. Wilson adds, she takes advantage of “teachable moments”, real life opportunities to explain the complex dynamics of race and inequality to her children. She shared an encounter during our interview,

We were at family amusement park a couple of months ago and were waiting in line to be served but we were being ignored. Other [White] people were getting served. We left and I had to explain to my kids why we did that (Personal Interview, December 2010).

Mrs. Wilson said it is important that her kids know “who they are and for that reason, she values the racial and cultural awareness that CCS promotes. Her comments hint at the changing race and class dynamics that are so central to life in America. The couple also noted the changing racial demographics in the city and how this also makes it necessary that African American children understand their cultural heritage and be confident in interacting with others. I asked if they were concerned about the homogenous nature of CCS, with its completely Black staff and student enrollment. Mrs. Wilson expressed that she thinks the nurturing is good for African American children in their formative years because it gives them a good foundation. She felt this nurturing promoted confidence and self-knowledge, skills they would need to navigate in a multicultural world. Her perspective stands in direct contrast to some teachers’ views that the family environment of CCS would act as a hindrance to students and prevent them from knowing how to function within non-Black environments and would render them particularly handicapped in interacting with Whites.
These findings on educator and parent perceptions of CCS clearly demonstrates that the constituencies at this school attach different levels of significance to the school as an African-centered space and the thusly, attach varying value to how the school shapes students’ racial identity. In addition to the analyzing the qualitative data I garnered from interviews and observations, I also analyzed CCS school literature to ascertain how the school perceives of itself as an African-centered space and how it conveys this image based upon the information in the school’s monthly newsletter, website, brochures and other promotional material. I found that CCS does not project an explicitly African-centered image. In fact, with the exception of the monthly school theme which is usually one of the seven Kwanzaa principles,\(^\text{72}\) there is no other mention of Africa or the African Diaspora in the newsletter, the school’s most consistent publication for parents and the community.

Much of the material in the school newsletter is aimed at promoting and acknowledging student achievement. For example, there is often information in the circular about study habits and ways that parents can support their children. Some newsletters list the names of students who have excelled in academics and behavior. The newsletter also informs parents of upcoming events such as special programs, high school open houses, Saturday school, Parent Empowerment Workshops, and acknowledges parents who have been involved in the school as volunteers. Finally, the newsletter also assists parents with personal and/or professional development by featuring information on financial workshops, job training programs, or social service programs and resources.

\(^{72}\) The seven day cultural holiday of Kwanzaa is based on seven principles which including Umoja (Unity); Kujichagulia (Self-Determination); Ujima (Cooperative Economics); Ujamaa (Collective Work and Responsibility); Nia (Purpose); Kuumba (Creativity); and, Imani (Faith). These principles have been adopted as the monthly theme and as the basis of CCS’s character-building curriculum.
In this next section I examine some of students’ views about the African-centered feature of their school. I also examine another issue that figured prominently in the qualitative data surrounding youth which was issues of safety and vulnerability. Following the section on youth, I will discuss how the Minority and Majority groups at CCS invoke the discourse of NCLB and school accountability to support their different perspectives on how the school has diminished over time.

Group III-Youth Views about CCS

The middle school students with whom I interacted were quite expressive in their views about CCS as a space that promoted an African Diasporic identity as expressed through certain linguistic and community practices, school celebrations, and classroom pedagogical strategies. They mirrored some of the perspectives held by the Majority educators at CCS and also articulated, in their own way, some of critiques within the literature about the tendency of Afrocentricity to essentialize the varied experience of Blackness (Austin 2006, Mullings 2000, Rand 2000). In this section, I introduce some key interactions that are illustrative of the process of negotiation in which youth are engaged as they try to make sense of their connection to Africa through the cultural influence at their school and in DC; and its relevance to their lives. Included in this section are brief excerpts from conversations and interactions with Anita, Dejaun, Derrick and Marquan, and Rayvon. I end this section with a discussion of how safety and vulnerability factor into youth’s understandings of themselves as being connected to a larger Black community.

Based upon the student data I gathered, students’ exposure to African culture and their internalization of the concepts conveyed in the school’s African-centered practices was superficial. Rarely did students offer extensive comments or thoughts about their school’s
African-centered character or even if they perceived of themselves as being connected to Africa in any way. Rather, it seemed that they just accepted it as part of the educational program.

Students seem to have a surface level appreciation for some of the Afrocentric components of their school although these practices (like the morning ritual), comprised the core elements of the school’s characterization as an African-centered institution. In a small focus group with three girls, one eighth grader, Anita, offered her thoughts on the Monday morning ritual, the village meeting. I recorded and transcribed the following exchange:

M: What’s your favorite part about the village meeting?
A: I Am Good (the poem)
M: Why is that your favorite?
A: ‘Cause if you aren’t having a good day the poem will remind you that something good happened and you should focus on that.

Anita also said she likes the morning ritual because it gets everyone “into the spirit.” She elaborated further by stating that it just gets everyone excited about the week. As I asked other students about this, others seemed to express appreciation for the creative aspect of the morning ritual, the singing and chanting. However, a deeper understanding of its purpose, and even the history behind components of the morning ritual, were absent. Similarly, Rayvon’s perception of what constituted African-centeredness was rather limited. When I asked her why she enrolled in CCS she said her godmother enrolled her because she is like Mama Rakia in that she wears dreadlocks and is a vegetarian.

I created an informal and mostly litmus test to assess how much students really understood about the morning ritual. Among every group of students with which I interacted, I asked if they could explain the meaning behind the words of Lift Every Voice and Sing by James Weldon Johnson, which has been called The Negro National Anthem and (and later, the Black National Anthem). For the most part, students were unable to explain what the song meant. After some probing, one 8th grader said that it was about “slavery and stuff” and said that her social
studies teacher (who was no longer at CCS) had taught them about the song. I found it surprising that most of the students to whom I posed this question could not explain the depth behind one of the school’s core practices that connected them to an African past. This emerges as a critique of the depth, or lack thereof, with which the school imparts its practices that are rooted in an understanding of an ancestral and contemporary connection to Africa.

In their own way, students critiqued the validity and the seriousness of their school’s African-centered feature character. On a bus ride back from a field trip I organized to Philadelphia, I engaged about fifteen students in a brief and informal discussion about the Afrocentric nature of CCS. Students expressed that only the creative arts and music teacher actively incorporate Africa into their lessons. These two teachers, it should be noted, are also ones that “dress” Africa, often wearing African shirts, dresses, and accessories. The students indicated that these teachers aren’t the “real” teachers at CCS, meaning that they did not teach major subjects like English, math, science, and social studies. One student said that they (the teachers) only teach them “slave songs” which she felt was not real African-centered education. This particular student was once enrolled in an independent African-centered school and had a broader exposure to this type of school environment than her peers. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a consensus among the small group of students on these views. Although two other teachers in the school, Mama Gregg who teaches English and Literature, and Baba Earl, science, also incorporate content on the African and Black experience into their curricula, it is interesting that the students did not include them in their characterization of African-centered educators.

DeJuan – Imagining Africa

On the visit to the Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology & Archaeology, some of the students saw the largest sphinx in the United States in an exhibit curated to feel like an ancient
Egyptian tomb. On the return ride home, DeJuan and I talked about CCS. The 8th grader said he would like to learn more about actual African history and other world cultures, rather than the cursory and sparse information he receives at CCS. He was curious about other countries on the continent of Africa and was skeptical about the Egypt-centered messages he mostly received when learning about Africa. DeJuan suspiciously exclaimed that, “Everything could not have started in Africa” (Personal interview, May 2010). DeJaun’s comments reflect a number of tensions including the depth and breadth of the school’s African-centered feature; the depiction of Egypt as a Black country; and the marginalization of Egypt from Black Africa.

Often the images of Africa that are conveyed to students are embedded in a royal history. During what Austin (2006) calls the Afrocentric Era, much attention was given to scholarship on Egypt as the cradle of civilization. A select group of scholars, among them, Molefi Asante, Asa Hilliard, Ivan Van Sertima, James Smalls, and the controversial Leonard Jeffries, advanced Egypt as the ancestral home of Black civilization. They argued that it was Egypt who influenced the great thinkers of Greece and Rome and that medicine, philosophy, and astronomy originated in the Nile River Valley area, then called Kush and Kemet. In centering Egypt as the birthplace of civilization, these scholars refuted Egypt as part of the ambiguous Middle East and claimed her as an African country. Through the accomplishments of ancient Kemet (Egypt) and the select African scholars’ reclamation of the region, African Americans legitimated an exemplary ancestral lineage inclusive of an intellectual, scientific, and spiritual legacy that predated and as some would argue, inspired the Greco-Roman empires. This version of Afrocentricity infused the Afrocentric cultural movement of the 1980’s and served as the basis of the curriculum for many African-centered schools and supplementary programs created during that time period.
sense, the accomplishments of Egypt’s antiquity has legitimated Africa in the eyes of many African Americans; thus making her acceptable to embrace and claim.

This royal African past seems to exist at the exclusion of the experiences of regular, everyday men and women although it is these very average, everyday experiences that hold relevance and connection to our lives. Such proclamations are problematic because they invoke a class-based evaluation of Africa’s meaning and value to African Americans. Yet, it is poor and working class African men and women who produce some of the tangibles upon which our lifestyles are reliant such as the palm oil from Nigeria and Ghana, an essential ingredient in numerous food and personal products that Americans use; the diamonds that adorn our bodies; and the gasoline that we wastefully consume; the shea butter from the African shea tree, and the South African platinum in our watches, rings, and personal devices. It is as if the Africa as royalty paradigm is really an attempt to prove our worth to ourselves, serving as a counter story to the commonly known narrative of Africans in America existing only as slaves. The royal paradigm is problematic because the subtext suggests that Africa and Africans cannot be embraced, accepted, and honored based in a contemporary context, and their everydayness. It promotes a class-based and elitist orientation of Africa that is study in antiquity that never sees the solar paneled contemporary light of today.

The youth of CCS offer an honest critique of African-centeredness at CCS and the implications this site has for African Diasporic identity. In my dealings within members of African-centered communities in Washington, D.C., I have heard people make statements like, “we weren’t just slaves, we used to be kings and queens.” Although intended to promote an inviting image of Africa, such comments inadvertently erase the experiences of millions of enslaved Africans from whom most African Americans descend. However, it was those enslaved
Africans that literally built the infrastructure upon which America currently stands and much of the American economy was built. Further, it underscores an internalization of shame and embarrassment about slavery in America, a reality that America as a country has yet to adequately reconcile.

Similarly, I have witnessed African Americans teaching and talking about Africa in utopian ways, depicting the continent as a once peaceful, communal, and righteous place until European colonizers disrupted the continent and set the precedent for all of Africa’s subsequent evils. As Clarke (2004) points out in her research on Yoruba practitioners, how in African Diasporans’ how embrace of African religions and other cultural forms, we fail to address the problematic aspects of ethnic practices that reinforce gender, class, and ethnic inequalities. Less considered are the political tensions that have resulted in ethnic and political driven warfare that have claimed the lives of millions across sub-Saharan Africa. The imagined notions of kings and queens from Africa’s antiquity will do little to restore the continent to the promise of its fullness thwarted by colonization and neo-colonialism. Rather, it promotes an idealized image that fails to address the problematic conditions under which many continental and Diasporic Africans contend with on a daily basis (Clarke 2004; Gayles 2008). As Mullings (2000) succinctly asserts, “Despite the importance of deconstructing Eurocentric representations of African history, the foundation of African American culture is not to be found in the tombs of the pharaohs (213). Mullings’ observation denotes the fluid and dynamic nature of culture and refutes the naïve idea that a recasting of history is all that is required for improving the conditions of African descended people.

I am not questioning here the validity of what historians, archeologists, and Egyptologists have proven in their research. I am not qualified to do so, nor does the scope of this research
include those considerations. Yet, I question the motivation behind feverish claims to ground Africa’s value in the existence of African royalty prior to the onset of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. To do so, is to invoke a class-based and disempowering model of connecting to Africa and nearly excludes the Diaspora. Consideration must be given to how African-centered people embrace, appreciate, and connect to Africa and her diverse Diasporic iterations through the experiences of everyday men and women. CCS attempts to foster this connection through the daily and weekly ritual practices at CCS and the sprinkling of African-centered pedagogy in the school curriculum. Yet, students expressed their tensions surrounding these practices. The segments from exchanges I had with and between students at CCS, illustrate their varied views African-centeredness. They also reflect the limitations of in how African-centeredness as an expression of African Diasporic identity is conveyed within this school space. These excerpts are also cogent because they reflect sentiments held among many within the Black community.

Derrick and Marquan – Afrocentric Misconceptions

In July 2010, at the request of the school’s Executive Director, I began coordinating a youth leadership program for CCS alumni and other neighborhood youth to provide them with academic and social/emotional support as they adjusted to high school. After several weeks of recruitment a core group of six teens, three girls and three boys, began to report regularly. Students would mostly do their homework, eat snacks, and socialize until we left together for special events I had coordinated. Among the six students, four were graduates of Community Academy and were thus, familiar with the school’s African-centered characteristic. Derrick and Marquan, were obviously good friends. The two tall and lanky teens both wore thick-rimmed glasses, sported close cropped haircuts, and at first glance could pass for brothers. Marquan graduate from CCS but it was Derrick’s first time at the school and he was intrigued by the way
“mama” and “baba” titles used to address the adults. Some of the African and African-inspired attire that teachers occasionally wore also piqued his interest. An obvious joker, Derrick found a way to express his curiosity while simultaneously conveying his ambiguity around the “Africa thing.” As I did not have consent to record these students, I have recreated Derrick and Marquan’s conversation here based upon my field notes.

D: So what, e’rybdy in here a Muslim?
M: No, stupid, (other students laugh) it’s a African-centered school.
D: Well how come they be dressing like that and saying mama?
M: Because, stupid, that’s what they do in Africa.
D: So, ya’ll don’t let white people in this school? Ya’ll don’t like white people?
M: No boy! We even had a white boy go this school before. White people worked her before!
D: Ewww! This school is retarded. I wouldn’t call nobody mama or baba, I’d call ‘em Mr. and Ms.

Though expressed in a humorous manner, Derrick’s comments reveal his discomfort with using such an intimate terms with what he likely perceives as strangers. The Dean of Students shared with me in instance in which a student was uncomfortable with using the mama and baba expression and used the standard way of addressing adults and Mr. and Ms. She was also sure to say that in the five years she had been at CCS, there was only one instance in which this occurred.

Derrick’s views also reflect a commonly held belief about African Americans who adopt what could be considered a more visible, African-informed identity exhibited by dressing in African clothing, changing their name to an African name; or join an a black cultural organization that promotes a black nationalist or pan African message. His comment reflects a broader conversation, and unfortunately, a misperception of African-centeredness which associates a pro-black or pro-African identity with militancy and an anti-white positionality.

I presented some of my preliminary findings from this research at the joint conference of the Association of Black Anthropologists and the Society for the Anthropology of North
American in Denver, Colorado, in 2009. I was met by a young White male graduate student who, after I presented a paper on the African-centered practices as Community Charter school, offered the perspective that the school was anti-American because the students sang what has come to be called the *Negro National Anthem*, instead of *America, Oh Beautiful* and also because at the time, the red, black, and green Black nationalist hung from the school’s flagpole instead of the United States flag or even the District of Columbia flag. I was so appalled at his assertion that these practices constituted anti-Americanism that I was hardly able to offer an intelligent rebuttal. Such comments or perspectives reflect an ahistorical and non-critical view about the racial and cultural domination of American culture and the ensuing need for African Americans to assert their identity and self-determination in the historical record. Some people assume that a black person who has identified with an African identity and displays an explicit connection to that identity has a disdain for all White people rather than the system of domination borne of racism and imperialism.

Derrick’s views also reflect a commonly held belief about African Americans who adopt what could be considered a more visible, African-informed identity exhibited by dressing in African clothing, changing their name to an African name; or join an a black cultural organization that promotes a Black Nationalist or Pan Africanist message. His comment reflects a broader conversation, and unfortunately, a misperception of African-centeredness which associates a pro-black or pro-African identity with militancy and an anti-white positionality. While this may be true for some, it is necessary to note that not a single definition of interpretation of Black Nationalism exists and that Black Nationalism does not necessarily equate to Black militarism, hatred, or violence.
Another interpretation of Derrick’s strong response (“Ewww, this school is retarded!”) is the ambiguity surrounding its practice and whether its use is based on a racialized notion of Blackness or something more inclusive. Although Derrick is not a student at CCS, his questioning of this rather common practice in schools that adopt an African-centered approach is indicative of an interrogation that needs to occur around these issues. His comments reflect how these practices and their assumed underlying ideology is contested among Blacks within and beyond certain Black spaces.

Rayvon - Vulnerability and Safety

Mama Olu, the Dean of Students, was instrumental in helping me formulate relationships with students at CCS. Her duties were primarily to manage student behavior and their resulting consequences, but she served as a default social worker. In our many discussions she shared with me the various challenges that students brought to school with them ranging from family violence to imminent eviction to parental abandonment. Further, she discussed some of the strategies she used to help mitigate some of the difficulties arising from these situations. This is where the positive behavior intervention program was instrumental in helping children and youth, who faced out of control situations at home, manage their in school behavior and obtain incentives and recognition for doing so. One such student is Rayvon, whom Mama Olu introduced me to while I was recruiting students for the focus group. I think Rayvon and I connected so well because I told her about my cousin who also shared her rather unique name. This intrigued and pleased Rayvon and allowed the student to open up to me during the focus group session. One of the first things we discussed, after warming up to each other, were some of the school’s practices. Rayvon, offers her perspective on the school’s salutatory practices. Here is a transcribed excerpt from our recorded discussion:
M: I wanna ask you some more questions about the school. You all call the teachers mama and baba. What do you think about that?
R: Well, it's like a family school. And when we're at school they’re our mothers and fathers.
M: Do you think calling them mama and baba makes them feel like family?
R: mm-hmm. certain people.
M: people like who?
R: Mama Yatara because she is a good example of a mama and Baba Amek would make a good father.
M: In what ways?
R: Because she respectful, she get all her work done, like if somebody messing with me she'll stop ‘em.
M: And what make baba Amek like a father?
R: Baba Amek - because he's positive, not negative and he's serious about his work.

Rayvon does not use the word African-centered but she expresses some of the core values upon which the concept is built which are family-centeredness and community (Akoto1994; Sefa Dei 1994). Two criteria clearly stand out as indicators of good parenthood and adulthood which are the ability of an adult (parent) to protect their youth, and hard work. Rayvon communicated this information with a sense of confidence and pride about her relationship with these two teachers. Based on the numerous conversations I had with students and many hours I spent engaged in participant observation of their world, youth at CCS appear to highly value the relationships they have with select teachers and staff. The basis for these relationships however, is not necessarily due to a teacher’s African-centered focus in terms of classroom content, at least not from the students’ perspective, but rather because of their ability to connect with, stand up for, and be present for students. Students shared their admiration for select teachers and staff that they thought was engaging, lively, and gave them a feeling of safety. The family-like aspect of the school is particularly meaningful for this student because of the challenges she was facing at home.

Rayvon was surprisingly, one of the few girls who returned a signed consent form although I distributed about twenty to the middle academy girls. I had heard Mama Olu and
others mention Rayvon’s troubled home life which manifested in aggressive school behavior and a despondent attitude toward learning. The school tried to redirect her energy by giving her lots of praise, recognizing her efforts, and providing positive reinforcement of desirable behavior. It was of limited help however, because Rayvon was often in trouble and eventually she transferred out of the school. Rayvon was the only student for the first twenty minutes or so of the focus group so we an opportunity to talk more personally. While discussing the mama/baba practice she expressed, “well, my father [is] not around right now.” Rayvon was quite obviously impacted by this, as she began to tear. I allowed her time to compose before continuing with the discussion. Her emotional rawness however, offers a vivid and moving example of how vulnerable youth can be, particularly ones from challenged homes. It also exemplifies how schools and the adults found therein, must be safe harbors and resources or students who are navigating their oft times turbulent lives. Rayvon also shared with me that just the week prior; she had gotten into a fight with her “best friend”, another student at CCS. Yet, despite the altercation, Rayvon considered CCS a “good school. She shares this view in another excerpt from our recorded and transcribed conversation.

M: Is this a good school?
R: Yeah.
M: What makes it a good school?
R: Cause it’s not a lot of fighting, and e’rybody get along

Rayvon’s comments stands as compelling data, revealing how the themes of safety, protection, and connectedness underscore her perceptions of her schooling experience. The salience of safety and protection are even more important when considered with the multiple threats that CCS students face. I illuminate four major ones here.
Physical Threats

In September 2010, Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi leapt to death after friends exposed video of him another man. A week later nineteen-year-old Johnson and Wales student Raymond Chase was found hanged in his dormitory room. Raymond was the fifth gay student to take his life in three weeks (Huffington Post, October 2010). The string of suicides, some school related, spawned national discussion and sensitivity toward LGBT students on college campuses and in schools. At CCS, these events, coupled with the concerns about bullying and violence in schools, prompted Mama Olu, the Dean of Students to initiate an anti-bullying campaign. The aim of her initiative was to address in-school and cyber bullying which had led to a number of fights and suspensions. I often heard students swearing, teasing, and joning\(^{73}\) on each other in class and in the hallways – activities that could easily fuel existing tensions. Mama Olu reported that in some cases students were so territorially antagonistic towards each other that fights would ensue simply because students were from clashing neighborhoods. While conducting my fieldwork, I was aware that several students were suspended for aggressiveness towards each other and one, for attacking a teacher. Even in the interactions I had with students, the field trips I supervised with the upper academy students and alumni, safety and appropriate behavior were always a concern. For this reason, I primarily relied upon Mama Olu, to recommend students for field trips and other extra-curricular activities based upon their behavior.

Environmental and Health Threat

CCS is almost hidden, as it is located in a rather industrial part of DC. An old railroad track, several vacant warehouses, and a taxicab dispatch station are located close to the school.

\(^{73}\) Joning is a form of ritualistic insulting that occurs in the African American community. Although there are distinct differences, other oral traditions in the African American community include ribbing, signifiyin\(^{7}\), and playing the dozens. Sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman (1991, 2000) has written extensively on some of these aspects of this Black oral tradition.
A small hub of automotive shops are located in close proximity to the school – so close that the fumes from the paint and other chemicals used at the shop can be easily detected in the air. On several days of visits to the school, I felt I would be sick from the harsh fumes. Students and staff inhale the toxins in the air on a daily basis. In a conversation with Mama Rakia about this, she compassionately responded, “I know, it’s horrible, but it’s hard to find real estate in D.C. This is what we could afford” (Personal communication, June 2010). Mama Rakia’s comments speak directly to the dynamics of gentrification and urban development which have been transforming D.C. in striking ways. Charter school operators, because of their degree of autonomy, must find their own real estate. In most instances, school operators opt to purchase new buildings or have private properties, as was the case with CCS. This, despite the fact that the D.C. Public Schools Real Estate Management Office have dozens of unoccupied schools that have been closed due to low enrollment. A recent Washington Post feature article discussed is often simpler than the protracted process of attempting to use a former school building that was not occupied.

This is not to give the impression that the CCS school building is in substandard or unsafe conditions. To the contrary, the school is in rather good physical condition despite the putrid air one often meets when they get to the school building. Thus, students at CCS and families in the neighborhood are faced with visible and invisible threats on a daily basis that could have long term heath implications. In expressing her discontent with certain aspects of the school, Mama Elaine also mentions the lack of outdoor activity the students receive. However, given the unpleasantness and possible toxicity of the air, less outdoor activity may be better.

**Emotional Threat**

The ubiquity of NCLB has pervasively altered the discourse within and around education. So many of the decisions regarding school schedules, staffing, curriculum, and allocation of
resources is in direct relationship to the need to make AYP and as Mama Rakia once said, “to keep the doors open.” Thus, students are constantly reminded about the need to perform. The hypersensitivity and near obsession about testing and performance, I believe places students, and teachers, under tremendous stress. Further, it promotes within young people, an attitude of expendability where they may begin to see their worth as contingent upon how “smart” they are and how well they can perform on a test. This stands in direct opposition to the philosophy of holistic education, which Mama Rakia indicated, is what inspired her creation of the school.

Class Threat

Washington, D.C. has one of the highest child poverty rates in the nation. The DC Fiscal Policy Institute estimated that in 2010, one in five persons in DC lived at or below the poverty level. Food insecurity, family instability, and other issues resulting from poverty have been proven to impede student learning, and inadvertently puts schools under greater pressure to address the related social and emotional needs of students. Class and poverty are salient issues for most of the children at CCS where the more than 90% of children qualify for free and reduced school lunches. This is particularly true for two students I highlight here – Ernest and Ceylon who are illustrative of the intersection of class, family, and school performance issues.

I noticed Ernest during one of my classroom observations in Baba Eric’s class, the music teacher. A young boy of about 9 years old, Ernest looked quite disheveled on the day I sat in his classroom. An eager student, he exuded enthusiasm about learning the different drum tones on Baba Eric’s djembe, a West African drum, which was the focus of the day’s instruction on the afternoon of my visit. His clothes were visibly dirty and he emitted an unpleasant odor. I brought

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this to the attention of Baba Eric who was surprised to hear my observations. He shared with me that the school had “adopted” the young man’s family and had been giving them assistance. Although he said he would look into the matter, we never had any follow up discussion about it. I saw Ernest a few days later and his appearance and hygiene were much improved.

Ceylon is another example of how poverty and class threatens the well-being of youth in the city and further complicates students’ young lives. Ceylon was a participant in the youth program that I coordinated for CCS graduates attending area high schools. She was a very intelligent, outgoing, and expressive young lady, who played the piano and wrote poetry. However, Ceylon’s home life precluded her from being fully invested in her education. Her mother, who worked for a short time at CCS, died from a long battle with a terminal illness just a year prior to my meeting Ceylon. Ceylon was highly recommended by Mama Rakia and the two teachers at CCS for the program. The said that she stopped by CCS often to stay in contact with her teachers, who had become, really, her primary source of emotional support since the death of her mother. She lived with her aging father and several younger siblings. As the oldest, she often filled the maternal role in the family. It was quite apparent to me, when I visited her house to discuss the trip with her father, that the family faced serious economic challenges. A brief talk with her dad confirmed his exhaustion over trying to raise the children and to keep an eye on Ceylon. I was pleased, however, that he saw the immense value in the college trip and consented to her going.

Ceylon welcomed the week-long, expenses paid trip away from home that the youth program offered. She also enjoyed being around a diverse group of peers. With the exception of the four girls I accompanied on the trip the other youth were Maryland public high school students. The exposure to the various campuses encouraged Ceylon’s college aspirations. She
even said she would apply to two of the school’s we visited on the tour. After the college tour, however, she became even more aloof. She never returned to the youth program at CCS and despite my attempts, I could not reach her by phone or when I visited her house. Ceylon’s peers in the youth program told me that she had frequent absences from school. I am uncertain how Ceylon fared, whether she remained on track academically at school or applied to any of the colleges we visited during the tour and in which she enthusiastically showed interest. Her situation, however, demonstrates how the potential of a promising student can get lost to the dynamics of poverty and lack of family support in her life.

A range of scholars from various discipline have powerfully articulated how the conditions of inner-city life can adversely affect young people’s choices and opportunities for mobility (Anderson 2009; Evans-Winters 2009; Fine 1998; Kozol 1985, Noguera 2003, Stack 2001; Sullivan 1989). Generations of poverty, discrimination, and government and business divestment have left countless urban neighborhoods depleted of jobs, affordable, housing, social services, economic stability, and other resources that enable a community to thrive. Although this dissertation is not a school ethnography in the traditional anthropological sense, these contextual issues are important to examine as they inform many aspects of the schooling experience and serve as the prism through which youth experience the institution of school.

As demonstrated by Rayvon, Ernest, and Ceylon’s circumstances, students bring much more to school than notebooks and pens. They are often are dealing with family and personal turmoil and school becomes a respite from home in addition to being a place of learning. Students at CCS were acutely aware of the threat of physical harm and gave voice to some of those concerns in our discussions. Many spoke of the neighborhood clashes and how kids will fight or jump (when several people fight one person) a kid from a rivaling neighborhood not
because there has been a discrepancy between the students but simply because they are from different neighborhoods which in DC could mean the difference of one block. Such concerns were prominent among the youth at CCS.

**PART II – NCLB TENSIONS AND CONTESTATIONS**

Educators, parents, and students at CCS are negotiating tensions and contestations on a number of levels. Along with the consideration of African-centered identity in this school space there are also concerns around parent behaviors, student performance – issues of class that are amplified because of the environment of competition and accountability engendered by NCLB. Underscoring these tensions of class is the practice of providing public education based upon a market driven model, which many researchers have identified as problematic in a country with such rigid class inequality (Anyon 2005; Hursch 2003, Meier 2004; Ravitch 2001). These conditions produce a tension with the school environment of which educators, parents, and even students are acutely aware. The various players at CCS voice this tension in their daily interactions and discursive acts. The discourse of NCLB and neoliberal education dominated the school environment in such a powerful way that nearly all of the conversations I had with teachers, parents, and staff, invariably came back to the themes of competition and selectivity. For a school located in a poor neighborhood, this climate disrupts notions of community and fosters a dynamic of tension and competition between schools and the families they serve. Although CCS is positioned as an African-centered school, the school teachers and staff are constantly negotiating issues of poverty, class, and competition on a daily basis. Many offered strong critiques of the school’s admission policies; parental and student behaviors; student learning levels; and the overall school mission.
CCS is located in poor community and many parents are overwhelmed with large families, few resources, and little support from extended family to help balance out the demands. This makes the school’s family support services a valuable component of the school. One teacher shared her appreciation for the family services that CCS offers. She makes a comparison in the comment below to other schools that don’t do quite as much to help families.

I think they do a lot more here. I do think they address education from a holistic point of view. [Through] workshops, seminars, trainings for parents, the fact that we provide dinner. Yeah, because that’s the only time [when ] they’re eating. Kids are given supplies, they [CCS] do consider a lot of families’ situation and they look out for the kids more (Teacher Focus Group 3, May 2010).

These services the teacher mentioned above are offered to help stabilize and strengthen families but few of them take advantage of the services. Teachers expressed being disheartened and frustrated by many parents’ seemingly lack of concern but they also know that many parents are challenged by structural inequalities like unemployment, multi-generational poverty, and unattended psychological or physical health needs. One male first grade teacher, Baba Ben, observed, “They’re [the parents] doing their best. You (emphasis the speaker) have to make the difference.” Mama Gregg echoed his words in a focus group, “I wouldn’t say that parents didn’t care, they send us their best. They send us their best and it’s our job to try to work with what we have, meet them where they are and [help them] grow” (Teacher Focus Group 1, May 2010).

While some teachers are empathetic to the structured system of poverty that families contended with daily; others were less tolerant of parents’ seeming disinterest in the education of their children. Thus, they framed their comments within a framework of social class which transcends issue of income and speaks more to values and expected behaviors. The Math teachers, Baba Daniels shares this reflection:

I see kids come to school every day ill-prepared, no pencil, no paper. Yet, they have these huge backpacks and designer sneakers on. I can understand the student who occasionally
forgets a pencil but some students consistently come with nothing. And it’s the second week of school! (Teacher Focus Group 1, May 2010).

Even the IT consultant, Baba Wood, who had been a contractor with the school for 10 years, shared his perspective on why parents were not more responsible in their role. He stated:

When we were young, we had the Cosby show and a lifestyle to aspire to. These families don’t have nothing [to inspire them]. You can’t even get parents on the telephone when you need to talk to them about their child. They get those throw away phones and change the SIM card in them and won’t give the school the number (Personal Interview, May 2010).

Wood’s comments, again, point to dynamics of income and class as indicators of acceptable behavior.

Admissions Policies

NCLB has heightened the competitive element within the educational environment and also between schools. Teachers and staff frequently commented on how other schools had more control over selecting their student body and as such, were able to produce better testing outcomes by admitting select students. D.C. charter schools, as public institutions, are theoretically open to any child who resides in the city. Yet, practices like “cherry-picking,” along with D.C.’s legacy of neighborhood segregation, mean that, for some children charter schools are the only choice -- especially in families where resources are limited and the neighborhood school is convenient and performing relatively well. Schools, like CCS, although founded to appeal to a certain population, begin to primarily serve the low-income children in the surrounding community. If the number of applicants exceeds the vacant slots available in any given year, those slots are filled by a lottery. However, other schools have found ways to be more selective in their admissions practices, although it is technically illegal. Baba Lamar is a Behavior Specialist at CCS, who works with students when they are disruptive in class. He expresses his frustration at these dynamics in one of our hallway conversations at CCS.
Charter schools are dumping grounds for “bad” students. Schools have to find a way to counter that, to exist despite that. So schools find a way to be selective in their admission because they want students that are going to help them succeed. They require certain things of parents [such as] put[ting] them on a waiting list and then make sure they don’t get admission. It’s illegal but schools do it (Personal Interview, October 2010).

Lamar is speaking here about power and authority, as well as the competitive element in public education that leaves schools feeling vulnerable to the behaviors the families they serve, particularly those that appear to be uncommitted, and unvested in the future of their children in ways that CCS teaches can identify. Baba Hart speaks to the issue of recruitment and selectivity as well:

The problem with word of mouth [recruitment] when the school doesn’t have a position of selection [is] you gotta take everybody. And what happens is the children who are struggling the most they come and grow in bigger numbers. So we got a bigger number of the children who are strugglers and that lowers the grade average for most of the children and I have children in the first grade who’ve been to three or four schools. I have a whole lot of them (Personal Interview, October 2010).

Another example demonstrates these tensions around student admissions. One afternoon while at CCS, I inquired about Audrey, a smart, energetic 4th grader I met while volunteering in Ms. Brannum’s class. I was surprised to learn that Audrey had transferred to another school, since she was doing so well at CCS. I was also surprised to hear teachers say that like Audrey, the school had lost many of its high performing students because their parents desired better schools for them where they won’t be the “smart kids” in their class.

In this climate of competition, and privatized “public” education, students are commodities, items to be bought and sold. Like real estate in a buyer’s market where a higher-performing student can command a slot in a better school (neighborhood). As is the case with Audrey, the brightest and best testing students with adequate family resources (financial, emotional, and social) are the most desired students. Conversely, poor, low-performing students who need more support are at the mercy of the system are less “valuable” because they are
academically weaker and could jeopardize a school’s future. Through his excerpt, Lamar provides a vivid example of how charters further disadvantage already marginal students within a privatized educational system. Baba Lamar further observed that CCS now enrolls more low-income kids at the school now than when he started 5 years ago. He comments that the “local values” of kids and families are different now and that kids come to school to socialize more and not to learn. In a similar way, Baba Hart also alludes to the decline in the “quality” of students at CCS, and the families from which they originate. He offered his critique of the neighborhood kids with these thoughts I transcribed from our recorded interview:

We’re driven by numbers, we gotta have a certain number to maintain our charter. So uh, you tend not to want to put them [bad behaving students] out but I still think if you put them out in that first month of school the word of mouth will get out [among the community] that “ok, they’re putting them out”. These behaviors, first of all, they won’t be accepted (Personal Interview, May 2010).

As demonstrated, teachers use the discourse of NCLB to talk about and substantiate their perceptions about poor families and their behaviors. Baba Hart’s language highlights the dynamics of class and competition that are at play at CCS and also reveals peoples’ discomfort in naming it and talking about it directly, although it occupies such a pivotal role in how people live and experience life.

Parenting Behaviors and Academic Achievement

Both minority and majority teachers were concerned about low academic performance and low motivation among CCS students. Mama Gregg, one of the Minority Educators, expressed her sense of urgency and concern about this in our interview. Although Mama Gregg, values the school’s African-centered focus, she is not disillusioned. She recognizes its limitation in changing students’ performance outcomes. She is well aware that academic performance requires a range of other resources, among them, secure funding, strong school leadership,
qualified and committed teachers, and parents that have high expectations of their children and who then, pass on those expectations to their children. Her comments below reflect this perspective:

MC: You spoke yesterday about a state of emergency or urgency. Something you said about intensive care?
MG: The intensive care unit.
MC: What do you mean by that?
MG: The students, because I have and I know what’s expected and what’s out there what it takes to get a good career.
MC: What’s expected? What the world expects?
MG: Yes! Not just here in DC but everywhere. What’s happening in classrooms all over the world and um our students are behind and I’m not in denial about that so I say that. This is intensive care. Our babies need all the help and nourishment and pushing. You understand? The hardest job is just motivating them to even look at it as “Ok, I need to do this.” That’s the hardest job you know.

By linking the condition of Black students to a hospital ward, Gregg conveys the sense of urgency over the state of youth. Her comment is not only about the urgent need to help Black children but it also speaks to the socioeconomic conditions that preclude parents from being available to nourish and push their children. Her comments represent the irony that surrounds her work, for the same support and motivation that keeps students lagging academically is also what keeps them blind to the need to change their condition.

Some teachers, including Baba Hart, the only founding teacher remaining on staff, implicate parents for not supporting their children and modeling good behavior for them to emulate. He also offers candid commentary on the daily struggle in which the school is currently engaged to stay open and to say relevant for the African American families it serves. These comments are offered verbatim from our lengthy interview:

The issue with some of our parents is they aren’t organized in their lives. They’re still dealing with whatever. They are not organized to help themselves. So if they’re not organized to help themselves it’s really difficult for the child. The teacher gets the blame but we know that your parent doesn’t have to be smart they just have to be organized: to go to work, to have positive habits in your house and that parent with positive habits normally [their] child is going to be successful. They might not be the brightest but they
are going to succeed cause they got good routines. They come in they change their clothes they wash up, do their homework, their parents try to work with them a little bit or get someone to work with them on their homework, they turn it in, all those good habits those things are the ingredients for success. But some children never do their homework. And now they set the standard, you can’t retain a child until the third grade. So now you send a child up to the third grade, the testing grade, you know they are going to fail. And not only are they going to fail, the schools going to fail, cause at some point in time the numbers are going to catch up with you (Personal Interview, May 2010).

Baba Hart’s comments not only reflect the disadvantage that some students face from the lack of family support, but he also discusses how these factors have implications for the school’s future and its overall academic portfolio.

Poverty and lack of resources is vivdly real for many of the families at CCS. Mama Olu, the dean of students at CCS, explained to me the socioeconomic reality of the student body and how she has had to help students with everything from uniforms to sanitary napkins and how some families are “really struggling,” meaning that many families had trouble meeting daily living expenses (Personal Interview, October 2010). The implications of poverty are greater than the lack of money and material goods. A hefty body of research shows the high correlation between poverty and school performance (Anyon 2005; Irvine 1990; Kozol 1985). Although standardized tests do not provide a comprehensive indication of students’ abilities, CCS’s failure to make AYP over the last few years, serves as further evidence of the reverberating implications of poverty. Meaning, that students’ low academic performance on standardized tests is an indication of socioeconomic conditions that preclude them from excelling in school. And since so few low-income and working class families actually transcend the rigidity of the American class structure, the result is a perpetuating cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement (Pew Charitable Trust Report, 2010).
Compromising the African-Centered Mission

Over the decade of its existence, CCS has undergone numerous changes in the areas of school leadership (principals) location, personnel, and demographics of the families it serves. Only the Executive Director and one primary grade teacher, Baba Hart remain from the original staff. Teacher turnover rate is also high; in the two years I spent gathering data, the school lost an average of five teachers annually. The school has been in three moved twice since its founding, and now occupies a renovated commercial building. In interviews with teachers and staff, many said that the “original” families at CCS consisted of parents who were looking for a particular type of education for their children. These families were often described as being more “African-centered,” because they wore dreadlocks, African clothes, and were vegetarians. Several staff said that with the relocation of the school, the clientele has changed significantly and now primarily consists of neighborhood children whose parents are under resourced and constrained in their ability to provide students a well-rounded school experience. Further, the parents and families who currently comprise the CCS enrollment, are ones who do not reflect African-centered identity in the way that Mama Rakia and other Minority teachers and parents at CCS conceptualize it.

Mama Rakia, the school’s executive director, was the most direct in expressing how NCLB demands have presented difficulties in the school’s ability to stay true to their original mission of providing quality education from an African-centered perspective. As early as 2007, Mama Rakia expressed concern over the school’s transition away from its original mission in light of “facility crises and state mandates to meet AYP” (Electronic Communication, December 2007). She noted, however, that the school retained “traces of African-centered methodology in the rituals, routines, and character building work we do with students” (Electronic communication, December 2007). Five years later, after the school had moved into its
permanent location, Mama Rakia reiterates this point in our interview where she spoke about factors that more directly impact the school’s existence such as the high number of students who are performing below their grade level in reading and math which, if not rectified, could ultimately threaten the school’s charter. In the segment below, she shares the deflating reality of how NCLB has impacted the school’s mission and her grander vision for CCS. She expounds upon the oppressive nature of NCLB and how it undermines innovative educational approaches.

In her own words she states with conviction,

It's a dream buster. It’s a dream buster. It’s a vision buster. It makes you really second guess why you did what you did in the first place because it's so, the stress of it, the, it's very child unfriendly. It really IS. Because it practically forces you to look at children as statistics instead of people, and you know, spirit-soul… someone with a heart, mind, you know, a personality. You know, it's like did they the test [well] or did they not, are they proficient or are they not. And if you don't get so many that are proficient we're shutting you down. It’s very cut throat, veerrrry cut throat. so they're very, very few rewards for all the sacrifices you know, that you make…and the accountability is welcomed. The accountability is one thing but it's just the nature of No Child Left Behind, and whether it's a charter school or I would imagine any public school or any school receiving public funds right now, what you have to do, you're basically selling your soul. I should be smudging myself every day (Pers

Mama Rakia’s motivation for starting CCS was to provide her son, and by extension, the many “nappy haired” children like him, with a culturally relevant educational experience grounded in a version of African-centered pedagogy as an expression of African Diasporic identity (Personal Interview, December 2010). Yet, the school’s numerous transitions over the past decade, combined with the educational policy, have diluted that original vision. Rakia speaks to the dehumanizing and “cut throat” nature of NCLB and how it undermines holistic education for African American children. She even employs the language of indigenous spiritual practices to convey the dirtiness of her work that is now so heavily dictated by neoliberalism and

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75 Smudging is a form of spiritual cleansing that is common in many Native American traditions. The practice consists of burning dried or bundled herbs (like sage) over a bed of coals whose smoke dispels negative energy from an environment person, or object.
hegemony. In her role as Executive Director, she must make difficult decisions that are sometimes as odds with her deeply personal motivations for founding CCS. The business model that is increasingly governing national education is based upon a linear input and outcomes model that shows little regard for social dynamics that impact urban family life, disable schools, and impede student performance.

Mama Rakia emerges as one who embodies the opposing dynamics between African-centered ideology, with an emphasis on the unification and liberation of African diasporic peoples, and the capitalist aims of NCLB. In that process, the school’s African-centered character is being compromised while class tensions within the school-community are being heightened. The implications of these are the subject for next and final chapter of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the Executive Director positions CCS within a network of African-centered group in D.C., in actuality the school is comprised of at least two competing groups, Minority Educators and Majority Educators, who have opposing views about the school as an African-centered space and the significance of this feature; and students. This research demonstrates that Black communities, more specifically, African-centered communities, groups of people whose conception of themselves is rooted in their sense of connection to an African Diaspora, are not monolithic constructions. As with other communities, individuals express their identity as African-centered through the prism of race, class, gender, and sexuality. My research nuances some of these tensions within an African-centered public charter school. What emerges vividly from the qualitative data is the manner in which minority and majority educators talk around class, at times using the language of NCLB and gentrification, as a central factor in the schools ability to function optimally. My findings further reveal that the way that individuals connect to and express African-centered identity contains a class dynamic that does not garner much discussion in academia nor within the communities themselves (Lemelle and Kelley 1994).

Competing Perceptions

Minority Educators at CCS highly value the African-centered features of the school, which they express in a myriad of ways. These individuals demonstrate that significance through school rituals based on their familiarity and/or affiliation with African cultural and religious groups; African-centered pedagogy; and performance which includes their manner of dress, adornment, and artistic expression through dance, drumming, or other creative means. Other features of the school’s African-centered feature include the mama and baba acknowledgement, the presence of Black political and aesthetic art throughout the school; and the recognition of
Black commemorative days such as Kwanzaa, Black History Month, and Black Love Day. Not all of these practices have their origin in African cultural or ethnic groups but exist as a hybrid of ideologies and practices found common among Black Nationalists who identify with the ideology of Pan Africanism and founded schools based out of that political stance (Austin, Benedict). Since Mama Rakia, the school’s founder and Executive Director, is part of this minority group of educators, her position of power enables her to enforce the school’s African-centered practices, but only to an extent. As I have shown here, majority group members resist adhering to these practices and assign little value to their existence. Not only does this compromise the school’s ability to amplify African-centered identity as a central theme in its educational approach, but it also results in competing and contradictory messages to students about the centrality of Africa in their African-centered school space. The ED and other minority group members elevate the school’s status among other African-centered groups outside of CCS through their facilitation of relationships with cultural artists (griots, African dance and drumming troupes, musicians, African-centered educators and schools (private and public), and organizational leaders, Yoruba and Akan practitioners). Tensions within and beyond the school’s domain however, preclude these resources from being as impactful as perhaps they were intended.

In the decade or so since its inception, CCS has undergone a number of transitions that have resulted in the school’s migration away from its founding mission as an African-centered public charter school. In interviews, educators and parents talked about the school’s change over time and how the school’s expansion into a middle school, also coincided with the demise of its African-centered focus. Minority group members reminisce about early days of the school’s existence when the clientele consisted of parents and children whose views about African
Diasporic identity were more closely aligned with the school’ mission. Current CCS teachers and staff describe these former families as vegetarian, dreadlocked, parents whom as Baba Hart clearly articulates, “were looking for a particular educational experience for their children and who were willing to reinforce it at home” (Personal Interview, May 2010). The imagery he offered was confirmed when I met one of these early CCS families during the school’s summer program. The Browns are a three-member family, comprised of a heterosexual couple and a teenage daughter. The mother is a professional Black woman with an advanced degree. I am uncertain of the father’s profession. The Brown daughter, Ronke, is a well-spoken and precocious teen who attends a private high school in Maryland. She attended the youth program I directed for two sessions but was unable to maintain her participation due to a busy afterschool schedule. This environmentally conscious, family is vegetarian and worships at a progressive and racially integrated Baptist church in DC. The mother and father both wear dreadlocks and Ronke wears natural (chemically unprocessed) hairstyles. The Browns, as I understand it, were one of the last African-centered families to attend CCS. They remain involved with the school, but only peripherally. For families like the Brown, claiming an ancestral lineage to African is part of their racial identification. Thus, they seek out schools, and communities of belonging that are reinforce the notion of African Americans as part of an African Diaspora. Being African, is a significant part of how families such as the Browns, identity themselves.

Contrarily, the Majority teachers have conflated the tenants of nurturing and support for underperforming Black children with a lack of academic rigor and accountability. They do not see African-centeredness as a priority for African American children. Rather they see it as something that will limit Black children’s ability to appreciate difference and excel in diverse environments. In the focus group with educator and in person interviews, they expressed the
viewpoint that African-centered education, as it is practiced at CCS, promotes a false reality for students and does not prepare them to function well in the world. In their critique of an African-centered environment, they bring attention to the dynamics of the market, and the need for schools to produce students that can compete in a globalized economy. These educators reflect a perspective that is highly relevant for today’s competitive job market. They also represent a generation who rhetorically question the contemporary relevance of African-centered education that emerged during the Black Power Movement, a markedly different Black political climate than what exists today.

Minority group educators, who embrace a particular African identity and African-centered education, certainly do not oppose educational excellence that fosters long-term success for African American children. Yet, they see the issue of African identity fundamental to producing that outcome. Majority group educators, conversely, do not see the maximization of an African-centered identity as being central to educational achievement. In fact, from their perspective, African-centered education at CCS has been conflated with tolerating students’ disruptive behavior and academic inertia. Through their critique of this African-centered educational space, majority group educators at CCS are rhetorically question the sanctity of African Diasporic identity and its relevance for advancing the social position of African American children and families. This dialogue is not limited to employees at CCS, but is occurring in the deterritorialized site of Washington, D.C., among, surprisingly, other African-centered community members. I am aware of other African-centered parents who are also evaluating the current model of African-centered education as an expression of African Diasporic identity. As Mama Horace, a mother of two children who attended a private African-centered school in D.C. for many years told me one afternoon, “My kids are taking Mandarin.”
This strategic move to empower her children with an educational and market advantage is not necessarily a refutation of African-centeredness, but certainly, an expanded notion of it. An anthropological inquiry of this dynamic may explore what these choices mean for African American families.

**Economics, Class, and African-Centered Communities**

Along with an expanded notion of what should constitute African-centered education as an expression of African Diasporic identity, the prominence of class emerges as another area of contestation at CCS. Teachers and schools staff, in particular speak of how economic dynamics with the city (gentrification and urban development) and class dynamics have resulted in a change in the clientele of CCS; whose student enrollment consists of predominantly neighborhood families and children. Yet, what staff also are discussing, albeit in subtle ways, are class dynamics and how our understanding of behavior is associated with class positioning. Such tensions are absent from academic and community discussions about African Diasporic identity construction centered communities as expressions of African Diasporic identity because they might disrupt the notions of unity and solidarity which are so intrinsic to discussions about the African Diaspora.

To an extent class, serves a gatekeeping function in determining who can participate in the expression of African Diasporic identity as demonstrated by the Minority group educators at CCS, and the degree of that participation. Thus class emerges as a mediator of belonging. For example, the presentation of an African identity expressed by wearing African clothes, and participating in African Diasporic artistic, cultural, and religious expression involves access to disposable income, a reality that is out of reach for many of the current families at CCS. Participation within these communities and expressing African-centered identity in this way,
requires knowledge of where to purchase certain ritual and cultural items and how to engage with others in these communities. Individuals must be keen to the network of limited stores and resources in the D.C. area, and beyond (in New York or Philadelphia, New Jersey) that vend these goods, as they are not sold in major retail stores. Individuals Community events geared toward individuals who express African Diasporic identity in this way, like the Odunde Festival, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are supported by networks of people and organizations for whom an African Diasporic identity is a prominent factor in how they identify. Access to such events, is facilitated by one’s involvement in African-centered communities and group who identity in this way. As such, economics and class emerge as a subtext of Africa-centered identity in this school space and in other African-centered communities within and beyond D.C.

**African Religious Groups**

Economics and class are perhaps more salient when examining the composition of African religious groups within D.C., (also called houses, as opposed to churches or temples); groups with which Mama Rakia, the school’s founder and Mama Laila, the creative arts teacher, are deeply engaged. These houses exist in a similar manner as the independent African-centered schools, relying largely upon initiated priests, members, and seekers to sustain local shrines. The factors of income and class determine, in significant ways, who can participate in these communities. For example, elder priests tend to be professionals (doctors, dentists, medical professionals, entrepreneurs, government workers) and others with advanced degrees and skills sets who can more readily afford the various rituals and initiations that are central to religious

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The Odunde Festival is an annual street festival held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in honor of the Yoruba deity of love, sensuality, and community, Oshun. It commences with a morning procession to the river where people pray and make offerings of honey, flowers, candy and other items favored by the deity. A section of the city is cordoned off for the marketplace, entertainment, and food vending that occurs throughout the day. Thousands of people attend annually, many of whom are practitioners of Yoruba, Santeria, and other African revivalist religions, but many others who are not. For more information visit, [http://odundefestival.org/](http://odundefestival.org/)
worship within these communities. Many initiations take place in the U.S., here in Washington, D.C., and in other urban areas with dense Blacks populations, such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and New Jersey. Scholars of African Diasporic religions have exposed how costly these endeavors can be, noting at times they may even require travel to Africa and other sites within the Diaspora where these religions are more commonly practiced such as Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil, Cuba, and Trinidad, where the religion is more widely practiced (Bascomb 1991; Clarke 2004, Mason 1980, 1991, Vega 2001). Along with initiatory rites, practitioners must also have the financial means to support their shrines with specific food, drinks, African cloth, and other items needed for worship of the various African deities and ancestors. This is certainly not to suggest that all or most practitioners in African Diasporic religions are of higher income or affluent class backgrounds. However; financial means does dictate, to an extent, how rapidly an initiate can access upward mobility within these religions, amass their godchildren (initiates under their leadership) and expand their shrines (houses).

Within some circles, and certainly among some of the Minority group educators as CCS, African-centered identity is associated with “holistic” and healthy practices including vegetarianism/veganism, naturopathic healing and therapies, massages, and similar such practices. This is compelling because of the manner in which holistic, healthy living has also been commercialized as the domain of the affluent and White. Even though Black farmers have played an essential role in this arena, media images of these lifestyle practices rarely depict Black and African people. Instead, upscale, organic, food stores and the environmental movement have become the symbols of this “alternative lifestyle.” An exploration of how African-centered communities adopt and reinterpret such lifestyles warrants further study.
Class also underscores the reason why the few Minority group parents had even enrolled their children at CCS. Independent African-centered schools are primarily through the tuition payments of patronizing families, community fundraisers, and donations from like-minded organizations that support their aims. Yet, managing private school tuition payments is challenging in today’s economic climate. Both African-centered parents in this study spoke of this dynamic. Despite their past patronage, economic conditions for both of these families prevented them from being able to maintain their children’s enrollment at the private schools, although it was clearly their educational preference. Changing demographic trends within D.C. also have implications for African-centered schools. Two of D.C.’s African-centered independent schools have been impacted, at least partially, by gentrification and urban development. Ujamaa Shule, the oldest African-centered institution in the nation, has publicly advertised fundraisers to save the “save the school from gentrification” (see Appendix). Based on my research, community members reported the school to the D.C. Consumer and Regulatory Affairs Commission for potentially violating building codes. The school is located in the Black historic neighborhood of Shaw, which is rapidly gentrifying. Also, at the time of this writing, the three story building that housed the Nationhouse School, another noted African-centered institution in D.C. was still on the market for sale and had been for several months. As the city’s demographics continue to change, it is quite possible that other private Africa-centered schools could be impacted by the growing polarization between the wealthy and affluent. This could present serious implications for the vitality African-centered schools, businesses, and other establishments who rely upon a select clientele for their sustenance.

For the Majority group members at CCS, class does not emerge as a mediator of African-centered identity but functions as an indicator of student behavior and family dynamics. Majority
educators complain of the lack of early literacy skills of young learners and overall poor level of academic performance exhibited by the many of the students. They also complain of disruptive student behaviors that make it difficult for them to carry out instruction. Lastly, they complain of poor parental involvement; and, irresponsible and disconnected parents who do not prioritize their children’s education. In this way, class serves as a mediator of student behavior where low-income students are viewed as a liability to a high performing educational environment and middle income students, or those from more stable families are seen as a more valuable; capable of exhibiting appropriate behavior; and, thus, easier to educate.

Minority educators have similar complaints of student behaviors but they also fault NCLB for creating an imbalanced public education climate that elevates testing scores and accountability above all else. This dynamic, has forced the school to compromise its African-centered focus and corral more resources around test preparation and keeping the facility in optimal condition. These educators also fault NCLB for rendering the school powerless in their ability to reject applicants. As a public school and a “neighborhood school,” that attracts many of the low-income families in the nearby housing development, CCS must accept any student that applies. Both Minority and Majority educators speak of the desire for more control over the school’s admission practices that would enable the school to select high performing students. The competitive educational environment that NCLB has engendered, with its reliance on student test scores as indications of school success, transfers to students where students are viewed as commodities.

Both majority and minority educators invoke, through the language of NCLB, a class framework to discuss how the school’s performance has been negatively impacted by its current clientele of students and families. Competition and selectivity, come forth as powerful themes in
the narrative of these two groups; and as such, Majority and Minority educators reinforce normative class constructs found in mainstream society. Ironically, these characteristics stand in stark contrast to the literature on the tenets of African-centered ideology which promotes communalism, cooperative economics, and solidarity among and between people of African descent (Akoto 1994; Sefa Dei 1994; Shujaa 1994).

**Implications for African-Centered Schooling**

The African-centered environment at CCS is eclectic mix of 1960s inspired Black Nationalist thought, Pan Africanism, new age spirituality, indigenous west African theology, social services, and character building system. The faculty consists of a heterogeneous group of individuals with varying understandings about Afrocentricity and approaches to Black education. While the community practices at CCS aim to instill within students and staff a core set of African-centered values, the environment remains broad enough to allow various expressions to emerge and have a place. During my data collection the school initiated a campaign to have as many extra-curricular clubs available to students as possible between 3:30 and 6:00 pm. CCS students can take yoga, African martial arts, join the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, or the Chess club. During my fieldwork I learned that a Jr. Marine Corp unit at CCS was being considered. It is unlikely that such a conversation would have occurred in a one of the private African-centered independent schools, or ones that grew directly out of the Black Nationalist and Pan Africanist discourse of the 1960’s. Such schools would consider such resources as advancing White Eurocentrism and American capitalism. Yet the clientele of CCS and the class dynamics at play make such programs acceptable to this population.

Youth development literature identifies the after-school timeframe as the most risky in terms of youth’s involvement in risky behavior, particularly for children growing upon high-risk
neighborhoods and who have no adult supervision after school (Casey Foundation, Kids Count 2010). Therefore the school’s administration was open to resources that would be beneficial to students and keep them safe. Thus, along with activities that have come to be traditionally or historically associated with African-centered learning environments, African drumming and dancing, African language instruction like Swahili and Yoruba were also available to students. Thus Blackness, as part of an African descendant identity is presented as a multi-dimensional and varied experience.

As a public institution, CCS is unable to explicitly enforce the Black nationalist political agenda of Pan Africanism and African-centeredness in the way that independent schools were able to do in the 1960’s and 70’s and that some still advance today. To an extent, the school’s African-centered mission became a victim of its own expansion in response to the interplay of local and extra local dynamics that impact the school’s viability. CSS is not a passive agent that merely responds to policies and trends enforced upon it. Rather, in exerting its own sense of agency, CCS is involved in a continuous bi-directional process wherein the school re-articulates its own version of African-centered education as an expression of African Diasporic identity.

**Expectations of the Study**

Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I had heard African-centered community members critique CCS for what they considered was the school’s superficial rendering of African-centered education. I entered this research with the aim of investigating African-centered public charter schools as a form of culturally relevant pedagogy as determined by the criteria established by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995). An alternate aim was to learn how schools with an African-centered focus conveyed messages of racial and cultural pride and Black empowerment to the
students and families they served. I expected teachers and staff to speak of how the school environment had favorably impacted their perceptions of Africa and had fostered within them a greater sense of connection to Pan African ideology and to their identity as African descended people. Yet, based upon the information I was gathering, my data began to reveal that a singularized understanding of CCS as African-centered space did not exist at CCS and that the many players at the school; teachers, staff, parents, and students, assigned varying degrees of value to the African-centered aspect of the school’s approach. Thus, the focus of my research changed to exploring how the various players within this environment understood themselves as part of an African Diaspora and the meaning that people assigned to that understanding.

A more fundamental concern arose as more central to my research which had less to do with evaluating the school’s African-centered rigor as an example of culturally relevant pedagogy, but rather, exploring how CCS was attempting to, within the current environment of educational privatization, and globalization, offer an educational experience grounded in a particular conception of African identity. This shift in perspective had a huge impact upon my study and my perception of the processes occurring at this school.

Even after my research focus changed, I was surprised to learn the degree of tension and contestation that was present at CCS, relative to constituents’ perspectives about African-centeredness as an instructional asset and about CCS as an African-centered space. I expected the majority of teachers and staff to possess a stronger investment in the founder’s ideology of African-centered education as an expression of African Diasporic identity. I expected the families enrolled at CCS to reflect a similar enthusiasm. Yet, as this discussion reveals, the degree to which the African-centered educators at CCS subscribed to normative class, and in some cases, gender constructs found within the larger society. Educators express these normative
views in the context of the socioeconomic status of families, and student and parent behaviors. Further, I did not anticipate that multiple layers of tension between the personnel within the school and between school staff and families, to be as prominent as they are in school operations. These findings reveal how spaces such as CCS challenge notions of a singularized Black, as experienced as African-centered, identity. As with other communities and social groups, members embody multiple identities, aspects of which often become silenced. This study elucidates how tensions around class, gender (in a limited sense), and African Diasporic identity are present even in spaces that are generally viewed as monolithic constructions.

CCS, as a deterritorialized space within a larger, deterritorialized site, reflects the issue of how African Americans understand and express their connection to Africa. Just as CCS is struggling to retain elements of its African-centered identity and practices, so too are many African Americans engaged in a process of defining for themselves what it means to be African descended and the extent to which that understanding translates into action for the advancement of Africans throughout the Diaspora. This debate is also reflected in African Diasporic literature where scholars debating whether connection to the Diaspora should be based upon traditions and practices borne out of the territory of Africa (Harris 2007; Shepperson 1993) or from the marginalized class position and lived experience that characterizes life for African descended people around the world (Gilroy 1993; Hamilton 2007; Skinner 1999). CCS is also engaged in this dialogue.

Even the school’s literature is reflective of this negotiation in how the school sees itself as an African-centered space and how it projects that image in the community. In the early days of its existence, the CCS website and in promotional literature the school was described as “African-centered.” That language has now been replaced with the key terms “family-centered,”
“holistic,” and, “culturally-rich.” In the decade of its existence CCS has moved twice, experienced numerous staff turnovers and two other African-centered public charter schools have been closed by the D.C. charter school board. In response to and in anticipation of these local and extra-local dynamics, CCS has been continually engaged in redefining itself while also trying to remain relevant for the youth and families it now serves.

**Interpretation of Data**

I have been involved with African-centered communities in Washington, DC for an over fifteen years, with varying levels of engagement. My analysis and interpretation of the results of this study were very much influenced by my sense of connection to people within the communities and their sense of connection to me. Many people at CCS are aware of my involvement in African religious organization, arts groups, and political activities grounded in African-centered ideas. Because of this, my informants in this study entrusted certain information to me that they may not have otherwise disclosed. This perspective allows me to offer a different articulation of these communities versus an “objective” researcher who exists outside of these communities. In her study of the Yoruba revivalist community at Oyotunji village in South Carolina, Clarke (2004) views her study and findings through the positionality of an outsider, a non-practitioner of the Yoruba faith and non-member of the community. Conversely, my spiritual, artistic, political, and personal development resources are embedded within this community yet are tempered by my stance as a scholar and interrogator of lived experience. I am hopeful that this dissertation can serve as an example of how scholars can engage in critical and relevant ethnography within their communities where their affiliation is viewed not as a liability but as a unique perspective informed by familiarity yet, balanced with scholarly rigor.
Single-Sited and Multi-Sited Research

The most recent literature regarding African-centered identities in anthropology offer a critical look at localized, single site studies (Clarke 2004). As Clarke (2004) notes in *Mapping Yoruba Networks*, a study of transnational Yoruba practitioners,

Today, anthropology is shifting from single-sited ethnography to multisited fieldwork that is indeed regional, national, and transnational. However, to understand these new networks and flows we need to understand how concepts of space and place are being reconceptualized not simply through people’s imaginations of spaces constructed through institutions but through the ways people use these institutions to reclaim, and thus produce, the domains – spatial, temporal, and national – in which modern classifications of ethnic and racial ancestry are being both usurped and reformulated (2004:11).

Returning to our understanding of the African Diaspora as a globalized space, I argue that multi-sited research, while useful, is not exactly practical or even necessary given the diversity of people and experiences that characterize many sites of African Diasporic identity. Due to the relative ease with which people can navigate geographic borders such spaces almost inherently encompass varied experiences. Washington, D.C. is a powerful example of the transnational flows that are present within deterritorialized sites. As this research demonstrates, even relatively small and racially homogenous spaces can contain significant variance in perspective and experience.

This diversity is especially reflected in D.C.’s African religious communities which are comprised of Ghanaians, Nigerians, Guineans, Trinidadians, St. Lucians; Afro-Brazilians; and, Afro-Cubans. African American practitioners also hail from different parts of the US such as New Jersey, New York, California, and Florida, where there is variation among and between their religious practices. This movement is not unidirectional but involves the bi-directional flow of people, ideas, and interaction that give birth to new epistemologies and iterations of African

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77 I am intentionally distinguishing African Americans here as American born Blacks who may claim African ancestry but identity racially as Black/African American as opposed to an African ethnicity like Yoruba or Ibo.
Diasporic experience. Thus, “single-sited’ ethnography can illuminate how these dynamics of fluidity and change play out within localized research sites.

What is the utility of studying how constituents at an African-centered public charter school attach significance to an African identity? Again, Clarke’s (2004) work stands as a metaphorical Sankofa, bridge to the past and to the future, as she demonstrates how ethnography can applied to unpacking the multiple tensions and reconfigurations around identity within African-centered spaces. Although founder and select educators at CCS position the school as an African-centered the data I have presented shows how this is a contested notion. Further, my study has also demonstrates that although CCS aspires to exist as an organization that counters hegemonic notions about African descended people, in many ways members of this community subscribe to the very notions of class and gender normativity they seek to disrupt. I argue that these potions are not unique to CCS, but are representative of larger tensions within African-centered communities in the U.S. As African-centered public charter schools exist throughout the country, these sites can offer unique opportunities for examining how the tensions and contestations of African Diasporic identity are playing out within the educational setting and the multiple and varied communities of which they are a part.

Limitations and Future Research

I conducted my research in one school which admittedly, as a public charter institution, enforced a less rigorous version of African-centered pedagogy than some of the independent African-centered schools. However, because my research did not focus solely on pedagogy, and given the sensitive nature of this research and its inclusion of children, a vulnerable research population, I was reluctant to include other schools in the study after I had advanced in my fieldwork. Yet, future investigations might do well to adopt a comparative approach or at least a
methodology that includes several African-centered schools as sites of African Diasporic identity. Such a study could make a significant contribution to the literature on African Diasporic communities in D.C., given the city’s history as the veritable home of African-centered education and the families and individuals that comprise these communities.

My research creates an opening whereby researchers can begin to interrogate the absolutist ways in which people often discuss African-centered communities. While my study amplifies the normative class constructions that exist in such spaces, there are other tensions around the lived experience of African-centeredness that merit anthropological inquiry. Some of the views expressed by educators and parents at CCS around race, sexuality and gender roles, mirror those I have heard expressed by others who participate in D.C.’s African-centered communities. Although these data are limited, they serve as insights into larger dynamics that are occurring at CCS, and within other African-centered spaces, and thereby, merit scholarly inquiry and future research.

The leadership at CCS consists of Black, professional, dreadlocked, educated, and at times, “loud” (Fordham 1993) aggressive women who identify in varying ways, as African-centered. These women work to sustain the school in the face of demanding NCLB laws, poverty, gentrification, and a tumultuous DC political climate. Within the Black community, women have historically occupied prominent leadership roles in churches, benevolent societies and aid groups before and during slavery. They have founded schools, and led political campaigns to advance the cause of Black people (Brown 1999; Hine 2005). However, woman-centered leadership is not always welcomed. As in other African-centered communities, woman leadership was not well tolerated at CCS, where many teachers and parents, both men and women, complain about the school director as aggressive, demanding, and unpleasant. These
dynamics invites an exploration of women and gender constructs in African-centered spaces where women as the “mamas” are only expected to challenge normative gender constructs within a certain context.

Similar tensions exist around male gender roles and sexuality. Two cases illustrate this dynamic. Two male students at CCS expressed themselves in a very feminine manner, ways that were considered by other students as incongruent with traditional Black male gender expressions. They whispered with one another, giggled, and displayed behaviors similar to that of teenage girls. One boy was very flamboyant in his presentation, often moving his hands dramatically and smacking and pursing his lips when he spoke. Although many teachers and students suspected that these two young men were gay, no one ever spoke about it openly. This resistance to acknowledge gender and sexual identity within these spaces reinforces stereotypes of an essentialized Black experience. The presence of gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals within the Black community, particularly within African-centered spaces, challenges some of these community members’ ideas about Black solidarity and authenticity (Jackson 2005). Continued research in these dynamics, illustrate how anthropology can impact our understanding of the varied, fluid, and constantly negotiated nature of Black identity.
APPENDIX A: “SAVE UJAMAA” FLIER

SAVE UJAMAA

SCHOOL FROM

GENTRIFICATION!

UJAMAA SCHOOL UNIFEST

Goal $500,000 by this summer for building renovation.

Support!!!
Baba Zulu and the kids!

SUNDAY
APRIL 8th

4-7pm Cost: $5 at door
Location: Soul 57 1326 Florida Ave NE

Live Performances and Vending

Red Line Graffiti

Ayanina Gregory

Dj Underdog

Jabari Exum

Ra Brown

Capoeira Mates

A/D Collective

Beads Byaroe

Difmt Wld Deli

Meet Ra Flow

Rahkel Yerzel

(contact: yuji.takada@gmail.com or 6tharsenal10m@gmail.com)
APPENDIX B: CHILDREN’S FOCUS GROUP ASSENT FORM

Chatman, Michelle C.
Ph.D. Student
Department of Anthropology, American University

CHILDREN’S ASSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS

My name is Michelle Chatman (though I am called Mama Maimuna here at the school) and I am conducting research for my Ph.D. in anthropology. Anthropology is the study of cultures and groups of people. I have decided to conduct my research here at Tree of Life School to learn about the school and how teaching and learning occur. I am also interested in learning how students feel about the education they are receiving.

You have expressed an interest in participating in a focus group for this project. A focus group is a guided group discussion where along with other youth you will talk about what you think and feel about your school, the programs, and the approaches it uses. This focus group will take place during the school day or immediately after school for about 90 minutes.

Your participation will be helpful because it will help me and others understand what Black children feel and think about their education, their community, and their Black heritage and history.

You may miss important course content time should you chose to participate in a focus group. However, I will try very hard to hold all of the focus group discussions during non-instructional times like lunch time or after school.

You can change your mind at any point if you decide not to be a part of this study. You will not get into any trouble with your teachers, school staff, parents, guardians, or me if you decide not to participate.

It is important that you know how I will use this information. I will be writing a paper (called a dissertation) which will include some of the things that you have said. However, I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name in my paper. No one will be able to figure out your name from reading my paper.

You should also know that I cannot guarantee your confidentiality in the focus group. This means that I cannot guarantee that another participating student will not tell others what you said in the focus group. However, I will strongly request that all students respect the privacy of everyone involved and not tell others who participated or what they said in the focus group.

If you have any questions later on about this project you may at (202) 841-6742. Thank you very much for being a part of my study. I look forward to learning from you.
**Student’s Assent**
This research has been explained to me and I agree to be a part of this study.

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Minor

______________________________________________
Signature of Minor  Date

I consent to the focus group(s) being audio recorded.

______________________________________________
Signature of Minor  Date

**Researcher’s Consent**
I certify that I was present for the assent discussion and that the subject had an opportunity to ask questions and appeared to understand the information presented and agreed to participate voluntarily in the research.

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Investigator  Date

______________________________________________
Signed Name of Investigator  Date
APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Chatman, Michelle C.
Ph.D. Student
Department of Anthropology, American University
Project Title: Beyond Kente and Kwanzaa: Race, Ideology, and Resistance in DC Schools
IRB# 09057

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS
(Approximately 90 minutes)

Four focus groups will be held with students in grades 6 – 8 to obtain their perceptions on their education, with specific emphasis placed on the element of Blackness and the inclusion of Black cultural elements in their educational experience. Discussion will be interspersed with other activities to keep children’s/youth’s interest and keep them engaged in the process. I will open the session with some warm up activities to help ease any tension students may have about participating.

Warm Up Games (8 - 10 minutes)
Option 1 – Ball-toss Game - standing in circle formation, participants will lightly toss a ball to someone in the group and according to the category, share their favorite foods, rap singers, and sports figures.
Option 2 - Line-up Game – youth will be asked to line up according to the number of siblings they have and/or the month their birthday falls in, all without talking (middle academy students).

Introduction - (10 minutes)
Review purpose of focus group, explain student assent form, and cover ground rules.

Discussion – Part I (30 minutes)
How long have you been a student at TOL?

How many of you attended another school prior to coming to this one? Was that also a charter school? What are the differences between this school and the one you used to attend?

How would you describe your school to other people?

Snack Break (5 minutes)

Discussion – Part II (35 minutes)
I’ve noticed that your school focuses a lot on things related to Black culture like Black history, Black holidays (Kwanzaa and Black Love day), Black art, music, and Black people? What do you think about this?

Do you think you have learned more about black history and culture (the way black people live) as a result of this?
How has the school’s focus on these things affected what you think and how you feel about Black people?

Does going to school here make you feel more proud to be a black person/youth? Please explain your answer.
APPENDIX D: ADULT CONSENT FORM

Chatman, Michelle C.
Ph.D. Student
American University, Department of Anthropology
Project Title: Beyond Kente and Kwanzaa: Race, Ideology, and Resistance in DC Schools
IRB# 09057

CONSENT TO PERFORM INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURES
(Parents and Community Members)

1. The purpose of this investigation is to learn how teaching and learning occurs at Tree of Life Community Public Charter School. This study is especially concerned with how the use of Black cultural referents impact students’ academic performance, their social development, and their notions of Blackness, race, culture, and empowerment. The Principal Investigator of this study is Michelle Chatman, a doctoral student in the department of anthropology at American University.

You are receiving this consent form because you have expressed an interest in being a participant in this study. As a participant you will be asked about your personal and professional history; your perceptions of the educational strategies and practices used at Tree of Life Community Public Charter school; and, your ideas about the future public education. The interview will be recorded for the purpose of creating a transcript, from which I will analyze the data.

As a research subject you are consenting to:

☐ participating in up to two interviews lasting up to 60 minutes each;
☐ allowing the interviews to be audio taped.

2. The risk to you is minimal and does not exceed any greater risk that you would experience in your daily activities. All reasonable precautions have and will be taken to reduce risk.

3. There is no direct benefit to you as a participant in this study. However, the information you share may help educators and administrators gain greater insight into the variable that impact the learning, personal, and social development of Black children.

4. It has been determined that the best way to obtain this information is through the procedures described here. Alternative procedures will not provide the level of ethnographic or detailed information that interviews and observations will yield.

5. Your confidentiality is minimally at risk of being breached because I will assign a study code to your interview transcript and use this code, not your name, in the analysis and reporting of this information. Your name will not be reported in any documents generated by this project.

6. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.
7. Should you have further questions about this study, you may contact me Michelle Chatman, Principal Investigator, at (202) 841-6742, or by e-mail at mccoghill@yahoo.com. Or you may contact my faculty advisor, Sabiyha Robin Prince, Ph.D., Associate Professor, American University Department of Anthropology, at (202) 885-1830, or at prince@american.edu.

8. Should you wish to express a complaint, concern, or desire to speak with someone independent of the research team you may contact Matt Zembrzuski, IRB Coordinator, American University, at (202) 885-3447, or at zembrzus@american.edu, or Dr. David Haaga, IRB Chairperson, American University, at (202) 885-1718, or at dhaaga@american.edu.

9. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you refuse to participate or chose to withdraw at any time you will not experience penalty. You can also refuse to answer any individual question posed without penalty.

I have read the above description for the research project and anything I did not understand was explained to me by the researcher and my questions were answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the above-referenced project.

I acknowledge that I have received a personal copy of this consent form.

________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature Date

I consent to these interview(s) being audio taped.

________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained procedure(s) involved in this investigation to the above participant or parent or guardian.

________________________________________________________________________
Investigator’s Signature Date

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APPENDIX E: ADULT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Michelle Chatman
Request for Continuation & Modification of Research Protocol
Dissertation Title: Beyond Kente and Kwanzaa: Race, Ideology, and Resistance in DC Public Schools
IRB # 09057

Focus Group Discussion Guide for Teachers and Staff
(Duration: Approximately 50 minutes)

Background
These questions are formulated to guide a discussion on race, culture, and culturally relevant education for African American children at a public charter school in Washington, DC. It is anticipated that up to three focus groups, lasting 50 minutes each, will be conducted with approximately 18 – 24 teachers and teaching assistants over the duration of this research project. Focus group participants will complete a very brief survey to provide background information on themselves and

Ideas about Race, Culture, and Learning
The questions I ask today will focus on your perceptions of Black culture and how it impacts the learning and identity formation of African American children. I have noticed that this school incorporates elements of Black cultural expression into its weekly regular practices and character building efforts such as the singing of the Black National Anthem, the recognition of Kwanzaa and other Black holidays, the abundance of Black art in this space.

1. What is your impression of these practices? How do these practices benefit students?

2. What do you think students learn about race and being Black from attending this school?

3. What does Blackness mean to you? To what extent does this environment reflect your ideas about Black culture?

4. Has working here changed your perceptions of Blackness and Black culture? If so, in what ways?

5. Have your perceptions about Blackness influenced how things are done here? (For example, has it contributed to a more widely constructed conception of Blackness to include Afro-Caribbean culture, middle-class Blacks, or gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgendered Blacks?)

6. How is Black history and culture reflected in your classroom and teaching practices?
APPENDIX F: PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Chatman, Michelle C.
Ph.D. Student
American University, Department of Anthropology
Project Title: Beyond Kente and Kwanzaa: Race, Ideology, and Resistance in DC Schools
IRB# 09057

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS
(Approximately 60 minutes)

1. Please tell me your child’s age, grade, and how many years s/he has been attending this school.

2. How did you learn about Tree of Life School?

3. What lead you to select this school for your child?

4. What do you think are the school’s strengths?

5. What do you think are the school’s weaknesses or areas that could be improved upon?

6. In what ways have you been involved at the school?

7. What are your thoughts about the infusion of Black holidays, culture, and art into the school’s curriculum and environment? (For example, the observation of Kwanzaa, Black Love Day, the use of African linguistic expressions, etc.)

8. How important do you think it is that your child receives this type of exposure/education?

9. Have you adopted any of the practices at home?

10. How is Blackness discussed, if at all, in your household or in your larger family?

11. What do think the future holds for Tree of Life?

12. What do you think the future holds for public education in DC and charter schools?
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