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Meah S. Austin

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# **Black Women In the Ivory Tower: A Case Study of the College of the Holy Cross Black Women Alumnae**

*With a focus on Identity*

Meah Austin

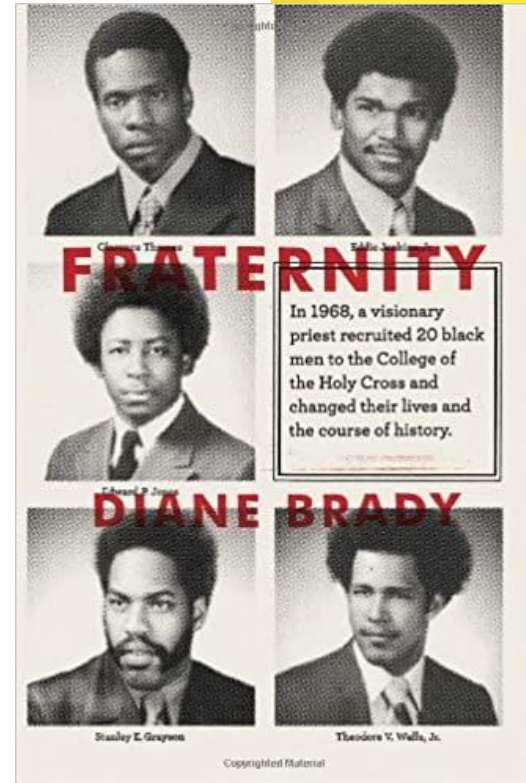
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Advisor: Mark Freeman

# The 'Why'

## Personal educational experience

- Oh, I am different!
- Previous scholarship
  - Groups students of color and/or Black students
- College of the Holy Cross Racial History
  - Founded in 1843: all male, presumably all White
  - Black men admitted in 1968
  - Women (including Black women) admitted 4 years later
  - “Fraternity” book



# Here's the **WORK**

## Research Questions

what experiences are unique to Black female students?

How does resilience manifest in the lives of Black women students at the College?

How do these alumnae come to understand their Holy Cross experience, as they look back at it?

How can the stories told ignite higher education reform?

## Methods

Narrative Analysis

Interviewed 18 Black Women Alumnae who graduated from 1976 to 2020

Interviews explored their pre-college experiences, their academic and social lives at College, and how they have made meaning to it all

## Theoretical Frameworks

Black Feminist Theory (Hill Collins, 2009)

Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989)

# Their *Lives* Explored

## Academic Life

Explores experiences relating to these women's academic lives: in the classroom and study sessions, with professors and classmates, etc



Yearbook photo 1986

## Social Life

Explores these women's social experiences during their college career: parties, dating, roommates, their "people," their involvement, etc.

## Identity

Reaches to the reflective lens of these women: their inner core, how they fashion their many identities, and how they come to understand their Holy Cross experience



Black Student Union Disco Party- late 1970s

## Intersectionality and Beyond

The many other identities these women hold beyond their race and gender

Women's perception of the multiple identities they live each and every day.

“Because I was a kid from the south Bronx, there was never a time where I didn't have to work twenty times harder than everybody else to do even good or great things. So I came to Holy Cross as a hustler. I've already accepted what it was to be a Black woman in America, to be born and raised Black and Puerto Rican in the south Bronx. So I was already comfortable with that reality.”

-Issa '00

“I'm the child of immigrants. They came to the United States from Zimbabwe, Africa for a better life. When they came here, they went to school as adults. So I saw what they were doing: going to school during the day, going to work at night. So I saw that hustle.”

-Molly '02

## Holy Cross, Know Me!

Aspects these women wish the broader campus community took the time to learn about them

“I would have wanted [Holy Cross] to know that it was a painful experience and that I felt I wasn't wanted. And that I'm a person just like anybody else. And that I came to college as an 18 year old student who had never been away from home no more than 2 weeks at a time and that I wanted to be just like everybody else: embraced, loved, and welcomed. And I didnt feel like that. I felt like I was there to fill the quota.”

-Lily '82

### Holy Cross, Do Better!

In the eyes of these women, the issues the College needs to address

Feelings that Holy Cross failed to adequately understand the needs of and celebrate the Black women population

“Holy Cross could have been more inclusive. They could have said to the Black folks ‘consider these organizations’ and for the groups who were leading these things, they could have encouraged Black students to join them as well. I don't remember anyone encouraging me to *belong* to something.”

-Jordan '76

“From a leadership perspective, Holy Cross didn't really have an understanding of us and what the need was. And I came to understand [that's] why people would leave. So it's what you make of it and the relationships you build to help you make it through”

-Olivia '89



## I Survived!

Perception of their college experience as one of survival, perseverance, and some regret

Decision to not return to the college as alumni

Personal benefits of college experience

“If God put me to do something, I'm gonna do it. I'm not gonna let any human being stop me.”

-Luna '79

“I knew exactly what I was doing when I chose Holy Cross. That's why I wouldn't allow myself to get caught up in it. Because I chose it. So I am the author of the story. So what Imma do? Sit here and bitch? No, *Imma walk it out*. There would be times when I came home and told my mom some of the stuff and she would say ‘look you can come home, you don't have to stay there’ and I'm like ‘nah, I started so Imma finish it.’ Yes there are some encounters I didn't anticipate, but there's also some fun things I didn't anticipate either.”

-Stella '87

## We are Sisters, We Stick Together

The Black women community bond and enduring relationships

Black women's celebration and affirmations of one another

“There was a tightness among the Black community at that time, especially the Black women. It was a place where we could go and talk, lift each other up, and talk about the craziness. But it also helped you to hear their experience. [So] thinking about the other women who were already on campus, they kind of helped give us a rite of passage, but at the same time, we supported one another to become who we are.”

-Olivia '89

## Looking Back

Reflections of overall college experience

Looking at college experience as one of triumph because of professional and personal growth, as well as their developed values

“For some of us, [Holy Cross] took us out. It wore us down. And we didn't come back for a little bit. Holy Cross can take you out. We have some folks whose experience was so traumatic, they never rebounded from it.”

-Ruby '91

“Overall, I loved Holy Cross. Yes, it has its downfalls. Yes, it's really hard. But it shaped me to who I am today. I had a lot of life lessons there, through the coursework, my friendships. I just grew a lot as a person.”

-Bianca '19

# Creative Resilience

- Plurality of Black women identities and meaning-making of experiences
- Misrecognition by broader campus community
- Seeing the benefits of their 4 years at the College
- Resilience: MORE than *overcoming* and *adapting*
- Black women demonstrate *creative resilience* both in how they lived their college experiences and how they look back at their college experience
  - Finding and sustaining Black women community
  - Self-formation
  - Seeing the valuable lessons



1982 Yearbook Picture



1976 Mulledy Hall picture

# Thank you!

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