

## Article

# Black Gay Men in Graduate Education: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Finding Black Queer Joy

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**Abstract:** In today's sociopolitical climate, many marginalized communities face unique challenges and yet triumph in carving a pathway toward happiness and self-acceptance. Among those resilient individuals are Black gay men, who experience the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality, creating an array of experiences. This collaborative autoethnography explores the distinct hardship Black gay men face in graduate education while trying to find Black queer joy, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), where these programs can perpetuate institutional and systemic racism and homophobia. Through interviews, three themes emerged: a sense of belonging, battle fatigue, and finding joy. Elevating the experiences of Black gay men emphasizes the importance of recognizing intersectionality and inclusivity in institutional spaces for a more sustainable future.

**Keywords:** Black gay men; graduate education; Black queer joy; sense of belonging; predominantly white institutions

## 1. Introduction

The intersectional identities of being male, Black, and gay while obtaining a graduate degree in predominately white institutions (PWIs) have rarely been examined. Although there is an inherent privilege for those who can obtain a graduate degree, Black gay men confront a unique set of challenges throughout their academic journey. At PWIs, they often encounter numerous difficulties connected to their intersectional identities of their race, gender, and sexuality; Black gay men often face microaggressions, racism, and homophobia (Carter 2013). These experiences can lead to psychological distress and mental health problems (Dunbar et al. 2017), further reinforcing a culture of silence among many Black gay men, forcing them to live their lives in the shadows and conceal their authentic selves in fear of persecution and discrimination.

Historically, the structural underpinnings of PWIs perpetuate heteronormative and racial-disparity ideologies (Blockett 2017). In recent years, they have actively recruited, enrolled, and developed institutional initiatives to support diverse students. Despite these efforts, diverse students continue to experience isolation and feelings of otherness. Studies found that a harmful campus environment can lead to experiences of marginalization, isolation, and racism (Brown et al. 2005). These negative experiences can significantly affect students' sense of belonging, ability to adapt and thrive academically, and likelihood of graduating from the institution (Brown et al. 2005; Cabrera and Nora 1994; Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005; Johnson et al. 2007).

An extensive range of unique characteristics shapes Black gay men's identities and experiences. One notable characteristic is the intersectionality they navigate, as they belong to both the Black community and the LGBTQ+ community. This dual identity often leads to distinct experiences influenced by the challenges and strengths inherent in these intersecting identities. Black gay men also come from diverse backgrounds, encompassing various ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations. These backgrounds



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contribute to the richness of their experiences and the diversity of their perspectives within the larger LGBTQ+ community. Although they face specific challenges related to discrimination, stigma, and disparities in healthcare, Black gay men often exhibit resilience and strength. Many find support and a sense of community within Black LGBTQ+ spaces and actively engage in advocacy and activism to address issues of inequality and discrimination.

These strategies include, but are not limited to, altering their behavior and distancing themselves from openly expressing their gay identity, while others have turned to spirituality (Follins et al. 2014). At the same time, some Black gay men have decided to create spaces that foster community and socialization for others with similar experiences. Others have practiced self-love and acceptance to navigate turbulent environments (Follins et al. 2014).

This paper is a collaborative autoethnography of two Black gay men currently pursuing a doctorate who share their intersectional experiences of being cisgender males and gay from two different Black ethnicities (e.g., Nigerian American and Afro-Caribbean). This presents their understanding of how to navigate the predominately white spaces of graduate education while being their authentic selves.

### 1.1. Black Gay Men in Doctoral Programs

Pursuing a doctoral degree requires endurance, persistence, and determination, which can be challenging and overwhelming. It is an individual experience, as one unilaterally pursues a specific study of interest. Still, it is also a collaborative element, as doctoral students often turn to colleagues and professors for guidance and information. Although there has been a rise in Black doctoral student graduates, there have also been ongoing incidents of anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression at PWIs that are not often examined (Gay 2004; Lewis et al. 2004; Maton et al. 2011). Black doctoral students often encounter racial discrimination by non-Black peers, faculty members, staff, and community members in academic settings as well as on campus and in their respective cities. First-generation Black doctoral students additionally navigate uncharted waters as they enter graduate education. They face multiple challenges, such as insufficient academic preparation (Atherton 2014), a lack of proper professional guidance and mentorship (Reid and Radhakrishnan 2003), limited knowledge of available resources, gender and race discrimination, student-identity-development issues, and discrimination within the classroom and on campus (Nora and Cabrera 1996; Havlik et al. 2020; Banks and Dohy 2019). These experiences illustrate how power is utilized to maintain the existing order in higher-education institutions, reinforcing social hierarchies, subordination, and systemic oppression. Moreover, for Black gay men, this educational journey becomes even more complex and daunting, as they not only have to deal with the institutional racism embedded within academia but also struggle with racism within the LGBT community (Collins 2005; Washington and Wall 2006) and homophobia within the Black community (Bowleg 2012; Means and Jaeger 2013; Moore 2010; Patton 2011).

The experience of being rejected by both sexual and racial communities can cause many Black gay men to feel isolated. This isolation can lead to a lack of support, causing them to conceal or downplay aspects of their social identities as a coping mechanism (Baylor 2002; Patton 2011). Means et al. (2017) utilized an intersectional and Black queer studies framework to examine the narratives of these individuals and identify common themes and challenges. Means et al. (2017) discovered that Black gay men face various obstacles in doctoral programs, such as navigating academic spaces as individuals who are frequently marginalized and isolated, experiencing racial microaggressions and other forms of covert racism, and feeling pressure from family, friends, and society at large. Blockett (2017) also found that Black gay men faced marginalization and struggled to participate and engage with the campus community fully. He discussed how two of his participants expressed feelings of isolation and discussed navigating “White LGBT spaces” both on and off-campus, where they found it necessary to create counter spaces. Limited research investigates the experiences of Black gay men who are pursuing a doctoral degree and how they are managing to overcome the challenges they face (Means et al. 2017).

### 1.2. Black Queer Joy in Graduate Education Programs

Higher-education institutions have played a significant role in perpetuating systemic biases and inequalities. This can be seen through their discriminatory policies, unequal distribution of resources, and a curriculum that fails to capture the diverse perspectives of marginalized populations (Harper et al. 2009; Patton et al. 2007). Among the many challenges, allyship within academia plays a significant role in fostering positive change, especially for Black gay men who confront many obstacles, including HIV-related stigma, racism, and homophobia (Arnold et al. 2014). The confrontation of these barriers can hinder Black gay men's academic success and well-being, making it necessary for allies to offer support and advocate to address these challenges. Allyship in academia can be used to challenge anti-Blackness and white supremacy by creating a safe, inclusive, equitable, and diverse environment where Black gay men can be empowered and feel accepted to be themselves.

Even amid the obstacles many Black gay men encounter, some flourish in graduate education programs (Follins et al. 2014; Hill and Gunderson 2015). Black queer joy is a phenomenon that celebrates the queerness within the Black community. Oliver (2022) defines Black queer joy as the capacity to acknowledge and relish the positive aspects of life as a Black gay man while also managing the difficulties that come with it. As Black gay men continue to progress and thrive in academia, their joy becomes an act of resistance against the racism and systemic barriers they encounter. For this article, Black queer joy is defined as an inner sense of joy, liberation, and strength experienced by "Black queer folk." It is a powerful affirmation of their worth and identity, providing them with the strength and resilience to navigate hardship while creating a supportive community.

Many Black gay men have developed resiliency strategies, including self-efficacy, coping techniques, and building social support (Wilson et al. 2016). These strategies serve as protective factors that assist Black gay men in enduring and thriving within these academic spaces (Wilson et al. 2016). However, there is limited research on this concept, and further scholarship is needed to explore what Black queer joy means for Black gay men in graduate education. The current study explores the author's self-definition of Black gay joy while pursuing graduate education.

## 2. Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach where researchers utilize their personal experiences as the primary data to better understand the cultural and social phenomena (Chang 2016; Wall 2008). Autoethnography, as a narrative method of inquiry rooted in interpretivism, challenges the prevailing influence of positivism within the social sciences. It illustrates how personal accounts of lived experiences can serve as unique gateways to explore facets of cultural life that are often beyond conventional research methods (Chang 2013; Jones et al. 2013). This method encourages authors to critically reflect on themselves within a specific cultural or social context (Chang 2013). Furthermore, autoethnography extends beyond mere storytelling. It enables the reader to engage with moral dilemmas and encourages them to think through the narrative rather than simply studying it.

Distinct from traditional autoethnography, which involves a single researcher's examination of their reflections, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) strongly emphasizes the joint efforts of two or more researchers. These researchers work collaboratively to share their autoethnographic accounts focused on a particular social phenomenon, working collectively to scientifically analyze and interpret the significance of their personal experiences within their sociocultural context (Chang et al. 2014). Using CAE provides a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and challenges prevailing narratives that may perpetuate stereotypes (Giordano 2014; Hamdan 2012).

Additionally, autoethnography as a queer method was also incorporated into our study. This research method involves combining personal and autobiographical stories with cultural and social aspects to explore the complexities of queer identities in a meaningful conversation (Ellis 2004; Holman Jones and Adams 2016). Utilizing both autoethnography

and queer theory focuses on the political nature of personal narratives, exploring how power structures influence our bodies and how bodies can be used to initiate social change. Autoethnography as a queer method is a means of resisting dominant discourse and power structures by producing alternative knowledge through marginalized voices, stories, and experiences (Holman Jones and Adams 2016; Spry 2011). It provides a nuanced understanding of the experiences of queer individuals and how they express their queerness and interact with society. In this study, we adopted this method to assess our lived experience as Black gay men in graduate education.

### 2.1. Procedures

The data were collected using two main techniques: audio recording and self-observation. We included two steps: autobiographic and dialogic techniques. First, the autobiographic approach began with each of us writing our narratives, which delved into our personal experiences and the intersections of our identities. One of us explored being a gay Nigerian American, while the other explored their experience as a gay Afro-Caribbean, all within predominantly white institutions. Secondly, the dialogic approach emerged, as we used journal prompts to cultivate trust and comfort between us. Subsequently, a series of Zoom video-conferencing sessions, held from June to August 2023, and lasting 45 to 90 min each, facilitated discussions about the written narratives and the collaborative process of constructing meaning around both unique and shared experiences. Additionally, we held weekly meetings to review and provide feedback on individual reflections and explore the commonalities and differences in our experiences.

### 2.2. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the rigor of our study, we utilized various techniques for trustworthiness (Hays et al. 2016). Trustworthiness provides a deeper understanding of the entire research process and implements several strategies, such as triangulation, transferability, credibility, member checking, and reflexivity (Curtin and Fossey 2007; Hays et al. 2016). Due to the limited literature on trustworthiness in using CAE, we decided to apply Le Roux's (2016) framework for assessing the quality and trustworthiness of autoethnography. The framework proposed five criteria that must be followed. First, we considered the complications of subjectivity and our willingness to share our personal and institutional experiences.

Additionally, we strongly emphasized addressing the ethical issues associated with sharing our narratives and ensuring the protection of others who may be unwilling participants involved and ourselves (Hernandez et al. 2017). Second, we engaged in reflexivity, centering ourselves within the research process, discussing our personal and professional experiences of being Black gay men in graduate education. Third, resonance occurs when a writer's story emotionally and intellectually engages readers by reflecting on a shared human experience. We shared our day-to-day struggles and experiences of joys and triumphs while navigating a predominately white institution. The fourth criterion calls for maintaining the credibility of the research process, which reflects trustworthiness. To ensure credibility, we maintained transparency by meticulously documenting the entire research process, starting with formulating the research questions, data coding, and interpretations of the findings. The fifth criterion is that our article centers on the experiences and identities of gay scholars trying to expand the discourse on intersectionality and diversity within graduate education.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Colaizzi's method of analysis (Colaizzi 1978) was used to analyze the data. We analyzed the data using Colaizzi's six-step method of analysis: (1) All transcripts were thoroughly reviewed by both authors multiple times, which was a practice of immersion to better understand the rich data and nuances of the authors' experiences. (2) Significant statements were recorded when they pertained to the phenomenon of Black queer joy in graduate education. (3) Subsequently, these statements were the foundation for meaning-

making. (4) The meanings of themes that captured the essence of finding Black queer joy in graduate education were analyzed. (5) The themes were then integrated into an exhaustive description that offered a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon, contributing to exploring Black gay men's experiences within graduate education. (6) The exhaustive description was then made into concise statements, capturing the fundamental essence of the phenomenon. Finally, a thematic analysis was used due to its flexibility and epistemological alignment with the objectives of highlighting the neglected experiences of Black gay men in graduate education.

#### *2.4. Positionality Statement*

As Black gay men who are on the journey of pursuing doctoral degrees, our unique positionality plays a vital role in our pursuit of Black queer joy within academia. Both authors come from middle-class families where education was valued. The study examined the insider perspective of the intersecting identities of being Black Nigerian American (the second author) or Afro-Caribbean (the first author) and gay cisgender men. The first author, who is Afro-Caribbean, was born and lived in the small island state of Trinidad and Tobago, a predominately African country. He was also educated in the Caribbean and has always attended schools and universities that were predominately attended by people of color. This is the first time he has attended a PWI.

The second author, who is Nigerian American, is a first-generation American from a family that migrated to the United States. He attended PWIs for his undergraduate and graduate studies. He also has an invisible disability that impacts how he learns. Both authors have recently lost a parent, one before enrolling in their doctoral program and the other during the first year of his doctoral program. They are Christian and have strong faith practices, such as attending church services.

### **3. Results**

Before moving forward, it is essential to note that the findings were presented confidentially, omitting identifiable information to safeguard the authors' anonymity. This was intentional, as the shared stories were essential for achieving our article's goals. Three significant themes generated from the analysis were (1) a sense of belonging, (2) battle fatigue, and (3) finding joy.

#### *3.1. Sense of Belonging*

On the topic of a sense of belonging, we explored the experiences of cultivating that sense of belonging while attending a PWI. Navigating the complexities of intersectional identities assisted us in creating a sense of belonging. Spaces were identified where we could be authentic, build meaningful relationships, and engage in academic and social spaces that recognize and celebrate our uniqueness. The following are reflections that illustrate a sense of belonging.

While I have a community with my cohort, I felt that my other identities needed to be nourished. As a person with protected identities such as race, sexuality, and disability, I needed to find a community where I could belong. As a first-generation student, the journey to earning a doctoral degree was uncharted waters, and I had to reassure myself on several occasions that someone who looked like me deserved to be here. So, I actively went out and tried to build a community of people who validated my sense of self. Luckily for me, the community were generous enough to share their resources, and some even provided mentorship, and on the occasion when they felt it was warranted, they would cheer me on. I would also like to acknowledge that having a space where I could process my experiences with another Black gay man pursuing their doctoral degree served as a means of allyship and aided in my ability to continue to progress in this turbulent process. There were moments in our discussions where I hoped that the sharing of my narrative would serve as evidence that I needed to cut my losses, but my co-author often provided

a listening ear via the phone and provided me with insight to aid in rejuvenating my reasoning to persist.

One of the co-authors shared his experiences with a sense of belonging:

Being a first-generation doctoral student, I did not know that academia can be cut-throat, until I became a victim very early on. It was in the first semester of my first year in the doctoral program, and I was still settling in, acclimating to the program, and adjusting to the volume of coursework. Little did I know that my cohort had reported me to the program's director as they were apparently having issues with me. I am not sure what the issue was, but I want you to remember that I was the only Black person in that space. When I was made aware of what had occurred, I was depressed and had suicidal ideation because I had not done anything to these people to warrant this. It took me a little while to get over it, and then I realized I would never belong, and I quickly learned that these people are not my friends. I remember my friend telling me that I must find my people, which is what I did. I have never regretted that advice because I have found support from people outside of academia, within academia from people in different departments, and outside my school.

### 3.2. *Battle Fatigue*

This theme discussed the challenges and experiences faced by Black gay men within these institutions. We provide different scenarios where it felt like we were perpetually engaged in a relentless struggle, navigating a battle. People of color are often in a state of preparedness, coping with and defending against racial microaggressions, which takes a significant physical and emotional toll on them (Smith 2009). The following reflection illustrates battle fatigue.

I am constantly prepared for any situation. However, I have been in situations where I have felt like I was trying to be policed regarding how I should show up in the classroom. I remember one situation where we were discussing how we show up in different spaces, and many others had feelings of stress and anxiety coming up for them. Still, when it came to me, I said I was good. I explained that I take things one day at a time. If it is not done today, tomorrow is a new day, and it will be done. I further explained that I am not stressing myself because that is not good for my overall health. I remember, after saying that, the entire mood of the class shifted, and I felt uncomfortable. I thought to myself, what did I say that made others feel uncomfortable? We were conversing about how we can show up positively and I provided my approach, and it was not appreciated. I was being my authentic self. What was the problem?

Another situation was when my advisor suddenly messaged me and said, "I need to talk to you. Are you available at 2 p.m.?" I said, "Yes, sure!" They called me over Facetime, which never happens, so I was frightened and felt maybe I did something wrong. My advisor stated that a few people had come to speak to them to ask if everything was okay with me. My advisor stated that this was the third time they had heard this, and immediately, they recognized I had no clue what was being said behind my back. My advisor told me that some people in my cohort said I was aggressive towards one of my professors, I was negative about the program, and they said I had said I had not learned anything since I had been here. I adamantly denied ever saying those things, unaware that an investigation into the allegation was conducted, and when they spoke to the professor, whom they had said I was aggressive toward, she indicated that I was never aggressive towards her. I was so upset that I went to the director of the Ph.D. program, who was kind and told me she understood what they were doing to me, which was not right. She even offered restorative solutions, but I declined because those restorative solutions usually put the victim of these attacks in the middle of a circle, where you can become a target because the perpetrators become embarrassed, and, as a result, they can become more subvert and malicious in their attacks.

One co-author shared:

Having an invisible disability, I understood that I was not starting at the same place as others. So, I took proactive steps and met with the access coordinator before the start of the academic year to ensure we had a plan to facilitate my learning. Yet, while taking a particular course, I spoke to a faculty member, informing them about my invisible disability and that I may need more time to complete the assignments and exams. The faculty member denied accommodations, and they told me I should learn like everyone else.

### 3.3. Finding Joy

On the topic of finding joy, despite the numerous challenges we encountered within the academic environment, we have discovered and cultivated moments of joy and resilience. As we embark on this personally held degree (Ph.D), we have uncovered unique pathways to happiness, each finding our sources of inspiration and fulfillment. These moments of joy have given us great strength and served as beacons of motivation, pushing us with determination and purpose to fulfill our dreams. The following reflection illustrates finding joy.

Losing my father to COVID-19 hit me hard. It was a time when I was already grappling with the demanding nature of my doctoral program. I realized I needed something more profound than momentary happiness during this emotional turmoil and academic pressure. Sure, achieving my fitness goals and staying connected with loved ones brought fleeting moments of joy, but I yearned for a deeper sense of fulfillment. I found solace in books that challenged my perceptions of self and life, guiding me towards a path where my happiness took center stage. Prioritizing my well-being became paramount in sustaining my motivation and focus, personally and professionally. However, it was when I ventured beyond university life that I stumbled upon transformative experiences. Attending the Black Boys Brunch, a monthly gathering that allowed me to connect deeply with other Black male professionals in the metro-Denver area, fostered a profoundly fulfilling sense of belonging and camaraderie. In these moments of connection and empowerment, I began to question and explore spaces dedicated to healing and liberation, leading me to embrace my journey more holistically.

You know, I believe it is essential to recognize that discovering joy as a Black gay man is not limited to a particular social location or institution. Rather, it is a feeling of being able to forget about the challenges and struggles I may be facing in my life at that moment. It is about living in the present and feeling a sense of shared experience with my chosen community, who remind me—through their words or mere presence—that everything will be okay, and I will survive.

One co-author shared his experience of finding joy:

Being in Colorado and away from my family has been challenging, as they have always been a source of joy and support. They have helped me overcome obstacles and challenges in life. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed me to explore new ways of staying connected with them, I still miss having them close by, especially during times of self-doubt and fear. However, I have found solace in exploring the beauty of nature in Colorado. The scenic views of the Flatirons, Red Rocks, and the changing seasons have given me a sense of peace and tranquility. Hiking and engaging in winter activities have become my go-to spaces for self-reflection and self-care. You know, in the face of adversity, I have also found happiness in my graduate program. I am grateful for the support and encouragement from my faculty and friends. They support my academic pursuits and personal needs, making me feel seen and valued.

## 4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Black gay men currently pursuing a doctorate while understanding how to navigate the predominately white spaces of graduate education, while being their authentic selves in the quest of Black queer joy. The uniqueness of this study is that the authors created their own counter space, where they offered each other space, accountability, and encouragement and provided each other with

insight that was crucial to their survival within these harmful places. A sense of belonging is a fundamental requirement for self-actualization and personal fulfillment. Black gay men experience the intersectionality of race and sexuality and are in a unique position that can considerably impact their experience of belonging in PWIs. These findings are consistent with (Hausmann et al. 2009; Samuara 2016; Strayhorn 2012; Wood and Harris 2015). Strayhorn (2012) emphasized the significance of a sense of belonging, especially for students who find themselves in unfamiliar settings and are experiencing alienation, feeling unwelcome, and lacking support. Additionally, due to the negative experiences of microaggressions, racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism, Black gay men are less likely to have a sense of belonging at their institutions (Hurtado and Carter 1997). The current autoethnography's findings not only emphasize the importance of a sense of belonging for Black gay men but also highlight how crucial a sense of belonging is to their academic success, personal growth, and mental well-being. Studies have found that students of color who have faced negative experiences are less likely to be successful and continue at PWIs (Iverson and Jaggars 2015). Therefore, the creation of a haven, often referred to as homeplaces, where Black gay men can affirm each other and find healing from the wounds inflicted by racist domination, is important (Hooks 1990).

Black gay men frequently encounter daily microaggressions that are often subtle instances of racist behavior and comments. These actions usually occur with good intentions but inadvertently convey unconscious bias, causing harm to those targeted. For example, being ignored for services or being assumed to be always negative (Carroll 1998). The battle fatigue the authors discussed is consistent with other studies (Smith et al. 2007; Goode-Cross and Tager 2011). Furthermore, the harsh reality that Black gay men endure can be emotionally exhausting and isolating. While doctoral programs place a significant amount of pressure on students to excel academically, for many Black gay men, this pressure can be intensified by the emotional turmoil they experience. The emotional burden can hinder their academic success and impact their self-worth, leading them to doubt their abilities while ultimately affecting their self-efficacy. These findings also emphasize the need for more allies within these spaces to advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion policies, and other systemic changes. Recognizing the battle fatigue generated by anti-Queer Blackness within academia is a response to the attack on Black queer joy (Mitchell 2022).

Finally, very few articles have focused on the positive of joy among Black gay men in graduate education. Our article is the first to highlight that, despite the many obstacles faced, Black gay men still find moments of happiness, success, and self-actualization, which can be a powerful act of resilience and liberation. With the inherent pressures of academia embedded in white supremacy, the constant denial of liberty and equity to Black gay men often hinders their ability to experience happiness and pleasure (Taylor 2018; Brown 2017, 2019). Black gay men in a heteronormative environment must celebrate their academic achievements and their Blackness because the ability to persist and succeed in these white spaces is a radical act in and of itself. It is essential to recognize that the mere presence of Black gay men within doctoral programs serves as testimony to their commitment to dismantling systematic barriers. By actively participating in academia, Black gay men contribute to a significant shift in the academic landscape, representing a positive step toward shaping a more inclusive and equitable future (Muñoz 2009).

The joy that Black gay men experience often is a source of strength and liberation. Such joy arises from various sources, including, but not limited to, spirituality, artistry, affirmation of their identity, and acts of love and resistance against heteronormative constraints. It empowers them to navigate the complexities of a PWI while ensuring their survival and commitment to self-actualization. We argue that Black queer joy is not a monolithic experience. It goes beyond communities and liberates intersectional beings from heteronormative structures. We also acknowledge that accessibility to external expressions of Black queer joy is not distributed equally and can vary depending on various factors such as intersectional identities, social and economic privileges, systemic barriers, and geographic locations. While some Black gay men may have many opportunities and resources to

cultivate Black queer joy, others may face significant obstacles in celebrating their authentic selves (Preciado 2013). Muñoz (2009) suggests that we should look beyond the immediate challenges that some Black gay men face in accessing the experience of Black queer joy. Instead, he urges us to reimagine a future where the joy of queer identities is not just accepted but becomes an essential part of the connections within and across communities.

## 5. Limitations and Strengths

Collaborative autoethnography has the potential to generate rich data through its reflections. However, there are several limitations of this study that are worth noting. First is the lack of generalizability. The nature of the autoethnography focuses on the individual's experiences, which in turn can restrict its generalizability to other places and populations. Second, the process heavily relies on the authors' personal experiences' interpretation, which can be subjective and biased. Additionally, the authors' experiences are specific to PWIs in Colorado and not representative of Black gay men in other states.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. First, the practice of collaborative autoethnography has received relatively little attention in the exploration of the experiences of Black gay men in graduate education. By utilizing collaborative autoethnography, researchers can elevate and amplify the voices and experiences of Black queer men in graduate education. This research methodology allows for a deeper understanding of their unique challenges, triumphs, and identities within the graduate education system. To contribute to the existing literature on Black gay men in graduate education, a collaborative autoethnography can provide a platform for these individuals to share their stories, perspectives, and lived experiences in a way that centers their voices and agency. By engaging in collaborative autoethnography, Black gay men in graduate education can reclaim their narratives and challenge dominant discourses that often ignore or marginalize their experiences.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study highlights that despite Black gay men's intersectional identities, the authors have proven to have an extraordinary ability not only to persevere but to thrive within these academic spaces. We admit that building this community was no easy task because we had to go and actively find it. However, the inner joy we received from our personal achievements, allies, and a supportive system was a beacon of strength and liberation helping us to break through barriers and redefine and reclaim our destiny. Additionally, this study provided a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Black gay men within graduate education, highlighting the intersections of race and sexuality and their impact on their academic success. Through our voices, we hope we contribute to dismantling systems of oppression that restrict Black gay men from finding Black queer joy.

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