



## **Black Men Writing, Reflecting, and Discovering Self: Personal Narrative Essays of College-aged African American Men at an All-male Historically Black College or University (HBCU)**

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Personal narratives are studied in many disciplines, but theoretical analysis of the personal narrative in composition classes has lagged behind the research. This qualitative study examines the personal narratives of thirty Black college-aged men. This study presents the feelings and thoughts of Black males through their personal stories and perspectives; in the study, they detail their life experiences. The narratives were analyzed for elements of narrative discourse, which include (1) Thesis; (2) Transitions; (3) Use and Evaluation of Sources; (4) Audience, Tone, and Rhetorical Appeals; (5) Organization; (6) Claims, Warrants, and Support; (7) Paraphrases, Direct Quotes, and Summary; (8) In-text Citations and Works Cited Page; (9) Style and Syntax; and (10) Mechanics (see scoring procedures). Each narrative was analyzed according to the criteria described in the Personal Narrative Rubric; the number of elements was counted for each category. The researcher recommends additional narrative studies of Black men in different age groups, educational backgrounds, social and economic levels, and geographical regions. Keywords: Personal narratives; childhood; education, resilience; family; Black college-aged men; self-identity; self-confidence; fathers; siblings; and mothers

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“As a subject of study, the Black male is persona non grata.” **Tommy J. Curry**

“Being a [B]lack man is demanding. Every day when we step outside, we are confronted with challenges that no other group of men is faced with. Some of us buckle under the pressure, and some of us rise to the occasion and make uncomfortable circumstances surrender to us instead of the other way around. The challenge to us as [Black] men is how do we make the latter the norm?” **Isaiah F.**

“The South believed an educated Negro [man] to be a dangerous Negro.” **W.E.B. DuBois**

“Nobody can teach me who I am. You can describe parts of me, but who I am - and what I need - is something I have to find out myself.” **Chinua Achebe**

“If I ever tell you about my past, it's never because I want you to feel sorry for me, but so you can understand why I am who I am.” **Unknown Author**

“When I discover who I am, I'll be free.” **Ralph Ellison**

“Everything that touches YOUR life must be an instrument of YOUR liberation or tossed into the trash cans of HISTORY.” **John Henrik Clarke**

“It is easier to build strong [Black] children than to repair broken [Black] men.”  
**Frederick Douglass**

Black Man...”Love Yourself Because you are the only person who will be with you in your entire life.” **MK**

“Colleges must create counter-spaces on campus where Black college men can begin to rethink, re-author, retell what it means to be a Black man.” **Daniel L. Pelzer**

“Writing situations [personal narratives] can be therapeutic precisely because we [teachers] don't act as therapists . . . In fact, the therapeutic power of such writing may be the experience of having it treated as “normal”—that is, writing that can be responded to, critiqued, even graded. Writing may have healing power because it represents a third part of the relationship; it is an artifact, a construction, a relatively stable representation of experience.” **Thomas Newkirk**

## INTRODUCTION

With the publication of Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789), Black men in America have been telling their unique stories of survival, triumph, and America's wealth and independence (See Appendix A). Their stories tell of the

brutality committed against Black male bodies and how America sought nothing more earnestly than the breaking of their social protest Black male labor was the cornerstone of the new-world capitalist project—Enslaved Black men came in droves before women were brought in equal numbers—the foundation of African spirits. It is why, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Douglass wrote his narrative not once but three times: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). He seeks to remake himself, tells his story on his terms, and hand it to future generations as a literary inheritance to Black sons who need to know that their agency is more significant than America's institutional racism. This tradition of penning one's narrative as a conscious legacy to future readers became the slave narrative genre. There are more than 100 memoirs of slavery written by Black men. Yet even after slavery, Black men continued to write their stories and tell their truth to sustain Black self-worth. Langston Hughes took the literary baton and gave the world *The Big Sea* (1940); Malcolm X took his turn and spoke *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965); Dick Gregory stuck out his neck and exposed the ugly pain of Black men in *Nigger: An Autobiography* (1964); Booker T. Washington shared his experiences as a Black male scholar in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in *Up From Slavery* (1901); Ta-Nehisi Coates stands upon these gigantic shoulders and speaks to young Black boys in *Between the World and ME* (2015). Billy Porter offers the most recent rendition of Black male life in his poignant narrative, *Unprotected: A Memoir* (2021). Indeed, these narratives demonstrate how Black men, since Middle Passage days, have been unadored, unprotected, and undefended because of their strength, resolve, and unmatched genius.

Writing personal narratives engages Black men in ways that we have been taught not to be involved in emotionally about our feelings of anger, pain, fear, and sexuality. Narratives help Black men articulate their entire life experiences and life circumstances. We recount the cultural, emotional, psychological, and social factors shaping our being. This tradition of Black men telling our unique stories continues as we seek self-identity, self-affirmation, self-liberation, and self-determination. Black men's experiences are deeply influenced by our racial identity. The historical context of racism, systemic oppression, and stereotypes shapes how we perceive ourselves. Our identity is multifaceted, influenced by race, gender, class, and sexuality. We seek affirmation through connecting with our cultural roots, traditions, and heritage. Furthermore, we seek agency to determine our destinies. Despite external challenges, we make choices that align with our values and aspirations. In analyzing personal narratives, understanding the positionality of Black men involves recognizing the influence of historical, cultural, and societal factors. Our stories are different but are shaped by experiences within broader social structures. Moreover, acknowledging the diversity within the Black male

experience is essential, as no single narrative encapsulates the richness and complexity of our quests for self-identity, self-love, self-affirmation, self-liberation, and self-determination (see Guerrero 2011).

Personal narratives as a reflective exercise can make [people] analyze, help shape, and make sense of our lives. The primary purpose of studying narratives is to acknowledge people's experiences and how they interpret and use those experiences. "In the experience-centered approach, narratives are the means of human sense-making: human beings create meaning from their experiences individually and socially" (Bruner et al., cited in Miyahara, 2010, p. 6). Narratives can reveal the insights of a person concerning specific moments in their life. Writing personal narratives is writing about oneself to reflect, heal, and plan future activities. Black men's narratives offer valuable insights into their feelings, experiences, and perspectives. Their narratives provide a deeper understanding of the challenges they may face, their triumphs, and the impact of societal factors on their lives through exploration of identity, resilience, and personal growth. Black men narratives foster empathy, promote cultural understanding, and help destroy stereotypes by presenting their authentic stories. Furthermore, they help Black men deal with the trauma of being Black. Black men may experience trauma in various ways, including racial discrimination, systemic inequalities, and societal expectations. Trauma can have profound effects on Black men, impacting mental health, emotional well-being, and overall quality of life. It may contribute to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Systemic racism and historical injustices exacerbate these effects.

Kristin M. Langellier (1989) noted that "personal narratives are studied in many disciplines, but theoretical analysis of the personal narrative has lagged behind the research." This essay presents perspectives on the personal narrative of African American college-aged men self-reflecting and self-discovering. By analyzing narratives' content, we identified an array of themes and topics, some of which include living with invisible or visible disabilities, coming to terms with sexual identity, navigating stereotypes and social perceptions, mediating cross-cultural and inter-generational differences, navigating mental and emotional health concerns, and processing the loss of self or loved ones. Of the topics written, the most common include experiences with learning, literacy, and communication development; navigating positive or negative relationships with parents, siblings, friends, and fictive kin; processing social embarrassment, shame, doubt, and guilt; and balancing personal goals with parental/societal expectations. Salamanca González, F. O. (2015) reported that "narratives reveal the way [people] see the world, feel sensations, and recall memories. In addition, personal experiences can enhance the students' writing skills. Narratives are meaningful for students because the texts connect to their lives. On the one hand, narratives are a space where

students can tell what they want to and how they want to; on the other, teachers can better know who their students are" (67).

Jamal Hagler (2015) reported that "more [B]lack men are going to college than ever before in our nation's history. For example, Black men ages 18 to 24 are closing the enrollment gap for postsecondary education. Historically, there has been a significant educational achievement gap between Blacks and White students. Higher enrollment rates for Black males can contribute to narrowing this gap and fostering more equitable educational outcomes. Thirty-nine percent of Black males in this age group attend some form of higher education. This number increased from 1988 when only 18.5 percent of Black males were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education; this compares with 30.3 percent of the overall population. As of 2014, the share of [B]lack males ages 25 and over who have obtained at least a bachelor's degree has tripled, rising to 20.4 percent from 6.3 percent in 1976. The rise in college enrollment rates for [B]lack men goes hand in hand with rapidly declining high school dropout rates for [B]lack men ages 16 to 24 (see Harper 2012,2014). Increased enrollment can be viewed as a step toward addressing systemic educational inequalities. Policies and initiatives that support the education of Black males contribute to dismantling barriers that have historically limited their access to quality education.

The dropout rate for [B]lack men within this age range fell from 21.2 percent in 1976 to 8.1 percent in 2012, while the national dropout rate fell from 14 percent to 6 percent over this period" (cited in "The Untold Narrative of Black Men in the United States"). Dropout rates can be influenced by a variety of factors, including socioeconomic status, educational resources, family support, and the prevalence of violence or crime in the community. Discrimination and systemic inequalities can also play a role. Economic factors can be significant contributors to high dropout rates. Limited access to resources, lack of employment opportunities, and financial pressures may lead some individuals, including Black men, to leave school to support themselves or their families. Schools in areas with higher crime rates or a lack of safety measures may see increased dropout rates.

Morehouse is the world's only all-male Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). It has produced four Rhodes Scholars, several college presidents, and leaders in many fields. Many of whom have distinguished themselves as great leaders in considerable measure. They include Howard Thurman, Lerone Bennett, Jr., Maynard Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian Bond, Mordecai Johnson, Spike Lee, Raphael Warnock, Jeh Johnson, Samuel L. Jackson, James Nabrit, Edward Moses, David Satcher, and many others. A Morehouse education begins, in part, with writing. The first writing task for all students entering Morehouse is an assignment that requires them to write an essay that responds to an academic topic. This practice reflects the College's longstanding

commitment to improving the writing abilities of Black males. No matter what academic field the Morehouse man chooses, he will use/need writing to think, analyze, investigate, and create. Mastery of written communication contributes to the success of Morehouse men because they are excellent writers.

In 2015, I was hired at Morehouse as an adjunct in the Department of English. Since then, I have taught English Composition 101, 102, and 103. In addition to my students completing the required essays for the class, I assigned them to write a 50-page personal narrative about their life experiences. At the same time, I shared my own lived experiences, perceptions, opinions, and biases. I encouraged these Black men to write a personal narrative to recount, reflect, and embrace various life circumstances. They had many problems beginning their narratives because some students mentioned many things they wished not to tell. Others stated that their lives were not interesting enough to write about. Despite the initial obstacles, each student wrote the first draft of their narrative in class and later came to a scheduled appointment with me to review and revise the draft. As the writing sessions continued, students could write and analyze their narratives to suggest changes. Eventually, the students became comfortable with writing about their lives. As they completed the assignment objectives, they produced engaging narratives that enabled them to develop a positive and empowering “self-identity.” More than 200 of my students have written 50-75 pages of personal histories over the past five years. This exploration method of personal experiences has been promoted in similar contextual studies by Bell 2017, Emanuel 2009, and Ellis 2020.

## **METHOD**

### **The present study**

This is a qualitative study designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of Black college-aged men’s personal narratives. Qualitative research is the process of understanding the experiences of individuals. This study follows a qualitative research design using narratives of thirty African American college-aged males at an HBCU. This descriptive research investigated African American college-aged males' ability to write personal narratives. The Office of Data, Analytics, Institutional Research and Effectiveness (DIRE) approved the study. The materials of this study were thirty randomly selected from eighty personal narratives written by Black men enrolled in six freshmen composition courses taught by this researcher. Eighty narratives were numbered, and thirty were randomly selected from the sample. Thirty narratives were analyzed and scored using the Personal Narrative Analytical Scoring Rubric (Appendix C).

## Subjects

This study included 30 African American male students randomly selected from African American men registered in freshman English composition courses at a private historically Black liberal arts college for men. The narratives of thirty students were analyzed using the Personal Narrative Analytical Scoring Rubric (Appendix B). The socioeconomic status of the subjects included men from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Most men (i.e., 96%) were between 17 and 18 years old; approximately 3% were between 19 and 21 years old, and 1% were between 22 and 30 years old. The sample population was African American males from Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale, Houston, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Memphis, Miami, Montgomery, Nashville, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Silver Springs, Tallahassee, Washington D.C., and many other cities and small towns across the United States. Their academic majors include art, English, history, music, biology, political science, sociology, business, religion, psychology, mathematics, computer science, and eighteen other academic majors.

## Procedures

**Collection of narratives.** The Black men wrote their narratives over fifteen weeks. Students were requested to write about their lives and reflect on what happened to them in their personal histories. The main goal of the assignment was to encourage students to write about themselves to recount and reflect on their life experiences. Furthermore, it aimed to empower them to achieve academic excellence, develop positive self-awareness, self-worth, and self-esteem, and view writing as cathartic. Twenty-five pages were due at mid-term. Throughout the semester, while students were writing, I checked their narratives. To connect with each student, I had face-to-face conferences to discuss their narratives and to share my life experiences with them about my father, mother, siblings, socioeconomic status, identity, interpersonal relationships, education, experience with racism, masculinity, and what it meant to be a Black man in America. The students granted the researcher permission to use their narratives in the study.

**Training of readers for scoring.** Three African American male raters: (1) an African American Studies professor, (2) an English professor, and (3) a history instructor read, analyzed, and ranked each personal narrative. Their years

of teaching ranged from seven to twenty-one years. All had taught at the College for at least five years. They were trained during three three-hour workshop sessions. In addition, the researcher conducted a one-hour training session immediately before each scoring session. In session one, the researcher explained the aim of the study. The Personal Narrative Analytical Scoring Rubric (Appendix B) and instructions for analyzing the narratives were also distributed during this session. In session two, each of the three raters was assigned eight compositions (two from each of the proficient levels randomly selected from the data sample) and asked to score each narrative according to the instructions and procedures provided by the researcher. They completed this scoring process four times so that each rater scored 32 narratives (two from each proficiency level). This second session aimed to familiarize raters with the scoring procedures and to assess if the raters agreed with each other about the exact rating of each narrative to determine inter-rater reliability. In session three, they discussed the reliability results and techniques to be followed in scoring compositions in the study.

#### **Scoring procedures and analysis of personal narratives.**

Personal narratives of 30 African American college-aged males were analyzed (see Fraser 2004, Riessman, 2003) and scored using the Personal Narrative Analytical Scoring Rubric (Appendix B). Most narratives were ranked at either the Intermediate or Proficient levels. Each narrative covered an array of themes and topics, some of which include living with invisible or visible disabilities, coming to terms with sexual identity, navigating stereotypes and social perceptions, mediating cross-cultural and inter-generational differences, navigating mental and emotional health concerns, and processing the loss of self or loved ones (see Watson, 1973, Polkinghorne, 1995). The most frequent topics include experiences with learning, literacy, and communication development, navigating positive or negative relationships with parents, siblings and friends, processing social embarrassment, shame, doubt and guilt, and balancing personal goals with parental/societal expectations.

## **RESULTS**

The narratives revealed aspects of the Black men's writing proficiency ranging from the novice to advanced level. (See Table 1). The analysis assessed their ability to convey a coherent story, use descriptive language, create an engaging narrative, and demonstrate a command of grammar and syntax at different proficiency levels. Additionally, it provided insights into the students' development of events and ideas, mastery of organization, voice, style, and overall writing skills. The majority of the personal narratives were ranked at either the intermediate or



**Table 1: Criteria for evaluation from advanced (4) to novice (1) level with corresponding number of narratives by rating.**

<b>Criteria for evaluation</b>	<b>Number of essays Advanced</b>	<b>Number of essays Proficient 3</b>	<b>Number of essays Intermediate 2</b>	<b>Number of essays Novice 1</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Introduction grabs the reader's attention</b>	N=17 Introduction grabs the reader's attention with a clever beginning.	N=12 Introduction only partially develops the attention-grabbing opener.	N=1 Beginning is dull <b>but</b> relevant to narrative.	N=0 Beginning is <b>dull</b> .	An effective hook gains the readers' interest and attention, creating incentive for them to continue reading. Most of the personal narratives had very interesting titles that were their focus and developed.
<b>Details in introduction set the scene.</b>	N=7 Specific details in introduction set the scene, creating a vivid picture of when and where the experience happened.	N=15 Details in introduction set the scene but are somewhat general.	N=8 Introduction partially sets the scene, telling only where or when the experienced happened.	N=0 Introduction does not set the scene.	The introductions of the narratives provided essential background information that created a general context for telling readers everything that they need to know before reading the body of the narrative.
<b>First-person point of view is consistent throughout the narrative</b>	N=20 First-person point of view is clear and consistent throughout the narrative.	N=9 First-person point of view is consistent in most parts of the narrative, with only minor inconsistencies.	N=1 A few noticeable shifts from first-person point of view occur.	N=0 Point of view is not clear, or it frequently shifts, confusing the reader.	First person point of view gives a story credibility. First-person point of view builds a rapport with readers by sharing a personal story directly with them. as an unreliable narrator. It expresses an opinion. First-person point of view builds intrigue. It limits the reader's access to information.
<b>Events are in chronological order</b>	N=15 All events are clearly in chronological order.	N=12 Most events are in chronological order.	N=3 Transitional words seldom connect the events, or some transitions are inappropriate.	N=0 Transitional words are not used.	Chronological order is often used in narrative writing. Chronology is essential because the exact order in which events occur helps us understand the cause and the effect of those events, how and why events unfold in the way they do, and how they are related.
<b>Transitional words connect the events, strengthening coherence.</b>	N=12 Well-chosen transitional words connect the events, strengthening coherence throughout the narrative.	N=14 Transitional words often connect the events, strengthening coherence in most parts of the narrative.	N=4 Transitional words seldom connect the events, or some transitions are inappropriate.	N=0 Transitional words are not used.	Transition words and phrases help illustrate the point being made in narrative writing include "for example," "in this case," "in other words," "to illustrate," "to demonstrate," "for this reason," and "in particular."

Criteria for evaluation	Number of essays Advanced	Number of essays Proficient 3	Number of essays Intermediate 2	Number of essays Novice 1	Comments
<b>Details elaborate upon each event, making people, places, and events seem real.</b>	N=4 Relevant details, including sensory details and dialogue, elaborate upon each event, making people, places, and events seem real.	N=16 Details, including sensory details and dialogue, elaborate upon most events, usually making people, places, and events seem real.	N=10 Details elaborate upon few events, only occasionally making people, places, or events seem real.	N=0 Details are omitted.	Narrative consists of a chain of events. These do not have to be spectacular action events – they can be internal psychological or spiritual events. Events in a narrative are knowledge the author wants to share with the reader or audience.
<b>Precise words communicate specific ideas or create images in the reader's mind</b>	N=7 Precise words throughout communicate specific ideas or create images in the reader's mind.	N=22 Precise words in most of the narrative communicate specific ideas or create images in the reader's mind, but some vague words are used.	N=1 Precise words are used only occasionally; vague words prevent the reader from picturing most events.	N=0 Vague words throughout the narrative make it difficult for the reader to picture any event.	Imagery brings life to narrative writing. It paints a picture for the reader to connect with you and makes your writing more interesting to read. The use of imagery can elicit certain emotions intentionally.
<b>Writer's thoughts and feelings are included</b>	N=14 Writer's thoughts and feelings are clearly included and related to the narrative.	N=15 Writer's thoughts and feelings are included but are not always clearly related to events.	N=1 Writer's thoughts and feelings are mentioned but not explained.	N=0 Writer's thoughts and feelings are not included in the narrative.	In writing your thoughts and feelings helps you to label emotions. It is key for understanding what you are feeling and why. This aids your self-awareness as well as your ability to analyze how you think and process your feelings. Research has shown that suppressing emotions can damage students' well-being as well as their social and academic performance.

Criteria for evaluation	Number of essays Advanced	Number of essays Proficient 3	Number of essays Intermediate 2	Number of essays Novice 1	Comments
<b>Conclusion states why the experience is meaningful</b>	N=2 Conclusion clearly states why the experience is meaningful, including how it changed the writer or what it taught the writer.	N=14 Conclusion states why the experience is meaningful, but the connection between the experience and the stated reason is somewhat general.	N=13 Conclusion mentions why the experience is meaningful, but the connection to the events is not clear to reader.	N=1 Conclusion does not mention why the experience is meaningful.	In the conclusion of narrative writing, you impart your takeaway message, a lesson, or a reflection -- a discovery of meaning in life -- to your reader. The ending should also include consideration of your thoughts about the event. It should incorporate the elements of introspection, analysis, and emotion.
<b>Standard English spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (with emphasis on punctuating dialogue) are used appropriately</b>	N=6 Standard English spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (with emphasis on punctuating dialogue) are used appropriately for this grade level throughout the narrative.	N=3 Standard English spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (with emphasis on punctuating dialogue) are used appropriately for this grade level, with few problems.	N=2 Inconsistent use of standard English spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (with emphasis on punctuating dialogue) appropriate for this grade level jars the reader.	N=1 Use of standard English spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (with emphasis on punctuating dialogue) appropriate for this grade is minimal and confuses the reader.	The use of proper punctuation, grammar, and spelling is related to the proficiency level of the men's writing level. Few grammatical errors appeared in Advanced and Proficient level narratives.
<b>Standard English grammar and sentence structure are used appropriately</b>	N=0 Standard English grammar and sentence structure are used appropriately for this grade level and are consistent throughout the narrative.	N=29 Standard English grammar and sentence structure are used appropriately for this grade level, with few problems.	N=1 Inconsistent use of standard English grammar and sentence structure appropriate for this grade level jars the reader.	N=0 Minimal use of standard English grammar and sentence structure appropriate for this grade level confuses the reader.	The students used a combination of simple, compound, complex, and compound complex sentences in their personal narratives.

proficient levels. These results summarize the characteristics of African American college-aged men's narratives analyzed using the Personal Narrative Analytical Scoring Rubric. See excerpts of their narratives (Appendices B- E). Also, see the "Selected Statements in African American Men's Personal Narratives" and "Topics Appearing in African American Men's Personal Narratives."

### **Selected statements in African American men's personal narratives**

#### **Black Man 26 –age 18.**

*I was outed to my mother as gay my junior year of high school. So like any reasonable black mother from the south, she took me to church. I had been raised in Baptist church; my Sundays started at 9am with praise and worship, and didn't end until 6pm. Wednesdays were dedicated to bible study. Thursdays were choir practice which rarely ended at the set 9 o'clock. We practically lived in church, but that changed after my grandmother died. I stopped being forced to go so I slept in on Sunday and claimed I had too much homework on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Before being outed I hadn't been to church in months. At that time, I was in a strange place navigating how I felt about the church and trying to understand where I fit in with their beliefs.*

#### **Black Man 18–age 17.**

*My older cousin ..... whose mother is my great-aunt told me that her mother and my grandmother were known as "clucks." That is what people who are known to do drugs but criticize others who do them are called in the [city name]. The overdose of my aunt made a lot of things come full circle, I remember thinking to myself "I hope my mother does not do drugs" my family was able to cover it up so easily that I figured that anyone could do the same. To function as a normal person with a drug habit is definitely a magic trick because drugs have such a harsh effect on our bodies.*

#### **Black Man 7–age 18.**

*For the majority of my childhood and early teenage days it was hard to find guys to bond with. Many did not want to be associated with me because I am openly gay and did not hide the fact that I am a member of the LGBT community. .... did not care that I was gay and socially awkward he truly saw me for me he did not judge my book by its cover and I whole heartedly appreciated him for that.*

**Black Man 2—age 18.**

*My grandmother in a way conditioned me to not trust white people. She particularly made sure that I knew not to trust white men, it was hard for me to understand why she felt that way. I had to understand that she was raised during the Jim Crow era and that her experiences with white people were completely different from mine.*

**Black Man 12—age 18.**

*During my junior year of high school, I started to experiment with my sexuality and test the waters. I knew that I was gay and had an attraction towards men but had never acted on the feeling. Growing up in one of the roughest areas in [city name] I never seen any LGBTQ members who were living their life openly. The only way that I see anyone of the community was through the internet, magazines, and occasionally the radio.*

**Black Man 15—age 18.**

*The time that I spent at that school truly exposed me to Christianity. Growing up, I knew about God but it was not until I attended that school that I developed a relationship with God. Bible study was a part of the curriculum at Robin's Nest and I was fascinated by the stories and parables that the Bible contained. However, this was only the beginning of my relationship with God and it was not until years later that I truly considered myself a Christian.*

**Black Man 4—age 17.**

*I had a seizure while I was outside with my siblings. I suddenly blacked out for what felt like hours and convulsed on the ground. When I came to I had an excruciating headache and my body felt as if weighed a thousand pounds. My vision was blurry and I could barely formulate sentences. I managed to drag myself to the house, and my parents immediately rushed me to the hospital. Once I was in stable condition my parents revealed to me that I was born with epilepsy. Epilepsy is a neurological disease that cause people to have seizures.*

**Black Man 23—age 18.**

*The white students at my high school were emboldened to do whatever they pleased. This included freely saying the word "nigga" with bold and unabashed entitlement. I was appalled by their boldness but I was more disgusted with my classmates for allowing it to happen. Many of*

*my classmates had been conditioned to think that it was acceptable for them to say the word because the white kids were our classmates or “friends”. Those of us who refused to accept this reality were labeled as “angry” or as being “stuck in the past.” At times I would literally feel sick as I listened to the white kids at my school satirically trying to speak in ebonics to tell a joke or sing a song before switching back to their accents.*

**Black Man 30–age 17.**

*I never had any bad experiences in school until my second grade year. Second grade was the first year that I had a Dominican Sister as my teacher. Her name was Sister.... She was incredibly bitter and always talked down to her students. Whenever she talked to me, I felt incredibly timid and small. Our class would always talk bad about her when she wasn't there. She gave unnecessary punishments. She even yelled at me for writing my name in cursive in my notebook just because she hadn't taught it to us yet.*

**Black Man 13–age 18.**

*Around this time the perfect family I had once known started to reveal its imperfections. Whatever marital issues my parents had began to announce themselves in an outward fashion. A visible fashion. Frankly, I didn't know they had any hitches in their relationship. But now I knew.. At the time I was unaware of what specifically was going on, but I knew it couldn't be any good though. Conversations became arguments. It all became way too familiar. To be in my home was a hassle. There was something in the air.*

**Black Man 20–age 18.**

*Eighteen years ago, loneliness and depression gave birth to a conundrum. Loneliness being my mother, a fifteen-year old woman with no sense of direction and a craving for attention that she wanted my father to satisfy. Depression being my father, a seventeen-year old man who lost his father years prior, had no idea how to be a man because he had no one to teach him. I was the conundrum, a pecan colored, brown eyed mistake that was not supposed to happen.*

**Black Man 10–age 17.**

*Our family had been taking shifts staying the night with my mom at the hospital to make sure she was all right. This night was my Auntie R's*

*turn to watch her. Even though my mother only had two kids, she was considered a mother-figure to everyone she encountered. When people heard that she got sick, she constantly got visitors to come and see her. People came to make amends, to recollect the memories they shared, to pray for her, and some just came to be in her presence. The night before she passed was one I'll never forget.*

**Black Man 9–age 18.**

*I have long believed that God was a tale, a story, a Santa Claus or maybe worse, that he did not even exist. Now, I have drastically changed my mind and I strongly believe that He exists, guides, helps, and cares for those who have followed and supported him. By belief I mean, to accept as true or real, to credit with veracity, to expect or suppose, to have firm confidence, to have trust, and overall, to have faith, something special and unique which makes us free. That is the way to believe in Him now. I know that the fact of believing is something personal, very personal, and nobody can confirm or verify God's existence, even science, but from my point of view, He is real.*

**Black Man 5–age 17.**

*Friends are a necessity in every child's life. They are there to comfort, to laugh with, and to create wonderful memories. All of a sudden a child grows up and gets thrown into college. His or her friends go to other colleges, and they both realize that they aren't going to have those close friendships anymore. It has happened many times before, and it will happen many times again.*

**Black Man 17–age 18.**

*My cousins and I had a close relationship. It was about six of us and we all lived around each other. I had two girl cousins and three boy cousins. Our family is very close. My grandma kept us all together. My grandma is from Mississippi and down south they love helping each other and making sure everyone is straight. I'm also like that so I think I picked up that trait also.*

**Black Man 19–age 18.**

*My grandmother was a sweet soul with such an amazing heart. She loved all and didn't see the wrong in you even if that's all you could see. Our lives seemed to mirror because as a child she told me they used to*

*treat her badly too. If no one defended me she did if no one wanted to watch me she would.*

**Black Man 1–age 18.**

*My experience at an all-male HBCU is amazing. I love how everyone was welcoming and I felt as if I could better myself in this environment. Being around other Black successful young men motivates me to become a better version of myself. The small time I spent at Morehouse helped me with real life interviews and situations. In addition, I'm the first in my family to go to college so this made both of my parents proud. My little sister, [name] is telling me that she now wants to attend Spelman when she gets older. I'm proud that my little sister looks up to me and that I made her consider an HBCU.*

**Black Man 3–age 18.**

*I accepted my sexual identity, yet I was struggling with my beliefs. How could I accept myself and surround myself with people who refused to acknowledge my existence? I was stuck. Being rooted in the faith but not agreeing with what the church stood for flustered me.*

**Black Man- age 79** (Excerpt from draft of one of my personal narratives).

*I was born in Memphis, Tennessee. I lived with my mother, grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, and her two children in a three-room railroad house with no running water, infested with rats and roaches, and an outhouse for a toilet. My mother and father never lived together and never married. I didn't meet my father until I was seven. I saw him again at age nine when he took me to Chicago to live with him and his girlfriend. When I started school in Chicago, I was in the fourth grade. I was given a test and was recommended that I be placed in grade six. My father said no. Each day I walked to school, I was involved in a fight with one of the students. One day the crossing guard told me that this would continue until I fought "the leader." So I did, and afterwards I was accepted in the group.*

*After six months, I was sent back to Memphis to live with my mother, her boyfriend, my brother, and sister. In August 1954, my father came to get me again. I was expecting to return to Chicago; however, my father had moved to Gary, Indiana, with his girlfriend and her niece, who I was told to accept as my sister. I refused. As a result, my father's girlfriend mistreated me. It was the first time I attended an integrated*



*school, Gary Tolleston. In 1956, my father was hospitalized for months with tuberculosis. While he was in the hospital, his girlfriend sent me to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to live with my father's sister for one year.*

## **PERSONAL NARRATIVES CONTENT AND DISCUSSION**

Every person lives and perceives life differently. Black men have a myriad of experiences. The Black men's narratives revealed insights into their life experiences. The students began writing their narratives the first week of class and submitted the final copy during the week of final examinations. Even though the proficiency of the narratives ranged from low-level one to high-level four, the information the students revealed about their life experiences and life situations was consistent. They invested a lot of effort and thought into the assignment. Although some narratives were not grammatically accurate, they contained self-reflection, revelations, personal growth, healing of past hurts, and self-determination. The personal narratives deepen their understanding of the events in their lives and others. Writing the narratives helped them to better respond to the cultural, political, social, and educational problems they have to deal with today. Scheibe (1986) explains, "Human identities evolve constructions; they emerge from continual social interactions. Self-narratives are developed stories that must be told in specific historical terms, using a particular language, referencing a particular stock of working historical conventions and a pattern of dominant beliefs and values" ( 131).

Several noteworthy themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis that provided insight into the life experiences of these Black college-aged men. Overall, each narrative covered an array of themes and topics, some of which include living with invisible or visible disabilities, coming to terms with sexual identity, navigating stereotypes and social perceptions, mediating cross-cultural and inter-generational differences, navigating mental and emotional health concerns, and processing the loss of self or loved ones. Furthermore, other common topics were experiences with learning, teachers, experiencing racism, writing, self-esteem, religion, navigating positive or negative relationships with parents, siblings, friends, and fictive kin; processing social embarrassment, shame, doubt, guilt; and balancing personal goals with parental/societal expectations.

### **Topics Appearing in African American Men's Personal Narratives**

The raters identified the following topics in the thirty narratives analyzed in this study. Numerous students stated that this was the first time they

had shared their experiences, and writing about them freed and healed them. Most of the narratives included three to four of the topics listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Topics in men’s personal narratives.**

01	Navigating love in adolescent /high school	21	Being shaped by exposure to extra-curricular (sports, music)
02	Hidden and/or forbidden love	22	Pursuing/giving up on professional, creative, careers
03	Coming to terms with sexuality/identify	23	Experience bullying or being bullied in grade school
04	Being raped by brother, uncle, others	24	Navigating difficult friendships; ending friendships
05	Cross-cultural or inter-generational differences, similarities, conflicts	25	Grieving loss; death of parent or loved one
06	Value of holidays, traditions, rituals	26	Witnessing parent or family member battle chronic disease
07	Coming to awareness of self, in relation to others	27	Reckoning with mortality; processing near death experience
08	Coming to awareness of racial/ethnics/religious identity	28	Relationship to religion, spirituality, prayer, faith, hope
09	Coming to awareness of other races, ethnicities, etc.	29	Aspirations to be writer, poet, screenwriter, etc.
10	Journey with learning, literacy, communication development	30	Exploring and embodying authentic self and personality
11	Value of relationship with grade school teachers	31	Living with (in)visible disabilities
12	Positive relationship to parents, guardians, caregivers	32	Coming into/shying away from roles of leaderships
13	Cultivating friendship at school, in neighborhood and community	33	Relationship to community and culture of birth and origin
14	Social and racial discrimination and barriers in education	34	Contention with parents, siblings, family, estrangement from
15	Parental opposition to career foals, to romantic involvement	35	Writing as send of responsibility, duty
16	Dealing with overbearing, domineering parental figures	36	Writing to reflect
17	Processing social embarrassment, shame, doubt, guilt	37	Writing to explore, know, grow
18	Balancing personal goals with parental/societal expectations	38	Navigating mental and emotional health (depression, anxiety)
19	Relationship to siblings	39	Experiences with social disappointment / shame
20	Being meaningfully shaped by nurturing teachers	40	Experiences with writing publishing, authorship
41	Detailing the narrative writing process	61	Navigating chronic illness, disease, disability
42	Reflection on goals (collegiate, career, financial, romantic)	62	Pressures to assimilate in grade school, among peers, out in society, in work force

43	Reflection on values and ideals	63	Navigating low self-esteem, weakened self confidence
44	The value of education, both formal and informal	64	Reckoning with/grieving loss of self, loss of familiarity
45	Exploring sense of purpose and value in the world	65	Applying to, preparing for, and coming to Morehouse College
46	Coming to terms with racial, social, class status in the world	66	Realization of talents, gifts, virtues, values
47	Becoming aware of politics, civil rights, social movements	67	Navigating social conditions of all white spaces
48	Hospitalization, treatment, and recovery for injuries and illness	68	Personal, firsthand experiences with racism and discrimination
49	Reflection on meaning and significance of names/naming	69	Experiences with travel (domestic, abroad)
50	Nurturing relationship to grandmother/maternal figures	70	Experiences with/adjustments to diverse cultures
51	Migration with family from northern to southern America	71	Experiences with racism abroad
52	Exercising imagination in early childhood	72	Graduation from high school (celebration and processing of)
53	Memories associated with space and place (e.g. childhood home)	73	Experiences exploring, redefining sexual orientation
54	Relationship to siblings (loving, close bond)	74	Coming out to self, parents, family, friends, loved ones
55	Relationship to neighbors, family friends, fictive kin	75	Being sexually outed without consent
56	Matriculation through grade school and post-secondary	76	Being lovingly embraced for sexual identity
57	Early exposure to Christianity/religion	77	Negative, traumatic religious experiences
58	Fear, shame, not fitting in with peers in school/neighborhood	78	Deep, profound religious conversation / ecstatic experiences
59	Relationship to politics; becoming politically aware and involved	79	Turning away from religion; being shunned by religion
60	The significance of role models, personal and adjacent (i.e. cultural)	80	Losing a loved one, grieving, loss

### Limitations of the Study

A study on Black college-aged men writing their narratives can offer valuable insights into their life experiences and perspectives. However, like any research, such a study comes with certain limitations:

The generalizability of the findings from this study of a specific group of Black college-aged men may not be readily generalizable to all Black men or men from different age groups, educational backgrounds, or socioeconomic statuses. The experiences of this population may not represent the diversity within the larger Black male population.

Personal narratives are inherently subjective. The study might not capture the full context of the participants' lives. Family dynamics, community influences, and historical context are complex and multifaceted. The personal narratives provided experiences up to the present time. A Black man's experiences and perspectives evolve. A longitudinal study should be conducted to determine changes and developments in their lives.

Researchers should be aware of their biases and minimize them in the analysis of the narratives. Analyzing personal narratives requires interpretation, and different researchers may interpret the same narrative differently.

Privacy and ethical concerns may arise when collecting personal narratives, especially if participants share sensitive or traumatic experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

When narration is taught in first-year composition classes, the focus often is not on the personal narrative essay. Yet, Black college-aged men can develop their voice by writing personal narratives. Assigning personal narratives, Black males reflect upon their life experiences. They identify significant values and life principles embedded in their narratives and explore them as a foundation for future situations. Since narratives are recollections of memories, there are many experiences and life situations students can tell. Most men mentioned issues concerning their childhood or conditions they lived/experienced in specific moments. Memories reveal the existence of their lives and who they are according to their interpretation.

Black college-aged men writing their narratives is multifaceted. Writing personal narratives allows these young men to explore and express their experiences, perspectives, and emotions. It can be a liberating process that helps them develop a stronger sense of self and cultural identity. The act of self-expression can be empowering. Personal narratives challenge and dismantle stereotypes associated with Black men. By sharing their authentic stories, they counter prevailing negative narratives and show the diversity and complexity of their lived experiences.

Personal narratives can contribute to the body of knowledge about the experiences of Black college-aged men, providing valuable insights for researchers and scholars. Personal narratives can be a catalyst for social and cultural change. In addition, writing about personal experiences is a therapeutic process. It can help process trauma, heal emotional wounds, and foster resilience. Also, personal narratives are an essential part of cultural heritage. Black men's narratives matter. They provide unique social and cultural perspectives and a deeper understanding of Black men's experiences, struggles, and life situations in America. They

challenge stereotypes, inspire empathy, and contribute to their educational, economic, and psychological development by sharing their stories.

Smith (1993) notes, “While life writing used to appear the most transparent kind of writing, perhaps because of the seductions of factuality, it now seems almost too complicated for words. Reading personal narratives, we find ourselves immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity, and politics as they bear on subjectivity” (393). We can use the personal narrative to reflect on and enhance our understanding of our human, social, and educational condition. In that case, the lives of Black men become central to the unique inquiry.

In summary, the significance of the process. Black college-aged men writing their narratives lies in the empowerment it brings, the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding, and the potential for social change and cultural preservation. It is a powerful tool for them to make their voices heard.

## CONCLUSION

I began this paper by describing memoirs and narratives of various Black men. I primarily emphasized the performative dimension and pointed the reader to sources in this tradition. When Black men write personal narratives, they articulate their life experiences, highlighting and describing themselves and the world in which they live. Thus, the personal narrative becomes a way of revisiting and reflecting on family, friends, events, places, specific moments, and others. Narrative research combined with other qualitative and quantitative investigations allows for a systematic study of personal experience and meaning. Personal Narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analyzing identity in multiple guises in different contexts. Personal narratives provide insight into lives that confront the constraints of life circumstances. Personal Narrative writing is not a substitute for more traditional styles of writing or learning in education. Examining personal narratives from Black men reveal themes of self-awareness, resilience, and identity exploration. They reflections on cultural heritage, experiences with racism, and personal growth. Narratives can help educators learn and understand the depth and diversity within the Black male experience.

Personal narratives are important in teaching writing to Black college-aged men. Black men's self-stories are often the source of much suffering in everyday life. At the same time, they seek growth and development of personal potential. Writing personal narratives in the

freshman composition class enables the Black male student to tell their stories and help the instructor gain knowledge of the student's life circumstances. They encourage Black men to engage in ways that we have been taught not to be involved in emotionally, about our feelings of anger, pain, fear, and sexuality. Personal narratives help African American males articulate their life experiences and circumstances. They recount the cultural, emotional, psychological, and social factors shaping their being.

The Black men's narratives in this paper often contained immense cultural and societal descriptions (e.g., cross-cultural or inter-generational differences and similarities, conflicts, awareness of politics, civil rights, social movements, and relationships to neighbors, family, friends, and siblings). This assignment for Black college-aged men provided the opportunity to integrate and reflect on life experiences. This assignment has the potential to enhance self-awareness and self-confidence. Its effectiveness as an essential learning opportunity for students is rooted in how trust develops between the faculty and students during personal narrative writing. I shared my life experiences (from age six to the present) to encourage this process. I emphasize that writing personal reflective narratives can be cathartic and self-empowering. The assignment encouraged students to reflect on community, cultural, economic, and historical perspectives. Still, some focus exclusively on narrating their lives and family history. Nevertheless, the assignment appeared to be a valuable tool to clarify the self's sources and identify relationships between a Black man's life experience and values in America.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research paper, several areas warrant further investigation to deepen our understanding of college-aged Black men writing their narratives. Therefore, I suggest educators encourage Black men to reflect beyond the family and incorporate greater awareness of community, society, Black life, history, and culture (BLHAC). The following are recommendations for future research.

(1) Conduct longitudinal studies that follow college-aged Black men over an extended period to explore the long-term effects of personal narrative writing. We could benefit from a longitudinal study that tracks college-aged Black males' progress from boys to men during their four-year tenure at an all-male HBCU. For instance, investigate their academic performance after they complete their narratives. Research into the experiences of college-aged Black males, in

particular, can add to our understanding of how to address conditions that contribute to their emotional stress, maturity, interpersonal relationships, self-confidence, and self-identity. Researchers can identify how this practice impacts college-aged Black men's lives over time by tracking their changes in self-perception, self-esteem, resilience, and overall well-being (See McGowan, Palmer, Wood, and Hibbler Jr. 2016).

(2) Investigate how intersectionality plays a role in the personal narrative writing process. Examine how various aspects of identity, such as socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability, intersect with race and influence the way Black college-aged men construct and present their narratives. What are their reflections and reactions about their writing at ages 17-19? What did they think when they wrote their 50-page' narrative? What were their thoughts and feelings, at that time, about the things that had to happen to them? Did writing personal narratives affect their self-identity, self-esteem, and self-consciousness, and did it change their opinion about their life experiences?

(3) Examine the role of culture and family in shaping the personal narratives of Black college-aged men. Investigate how cultural traditions, family values, and intergenerational experiences influence their storytelling practices and narrative content. Conduct research with a diverse cohort of Black men when asked to write their perspectives of their relationship with their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, cousins, aunts and uncles, and friends. Elicit their feelings and experiences, if any, with racism, violence, Black women, white friends, teachers, police brutality, poverty, LGBTQA+, racism, sexism, Black-on-Black violence, education, parents, and siblings.

(4) Investigate the relationship between personal narrative writing and mental health outcomes among college-aged Black men. Explore how this practice serves as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, and trauma and its potential role in mental health interventions.

(5) Examine how integrating personal narrative writing into curricula can positively affect academic engagement, retention, and achievement among Black college-aged men. Explore whether this approach can lead to greater self-advocacy and academic success.

(6) Investigate if Black college-aged men share their narratives, facilitate the development of writing skills (See Martin, 2010), and provide emotional support throughout the process. A study could compare these factors with Black men attending other HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

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### Appendix A Selected Black Men Memoirs

- From the publication of Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* in (1789) to Billy Porter's *Unprotected: A Memoir* (2021), Black men have shared their life experiences in personal narratives and memoirs. They have struggled to make sense of being "persona non grata" in America and how their very presence is viewed as a threat to white America in many situations. A diverse group writes many narratives of Black men such as:
  - Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968)
  - Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995)
  - Mumia Abu-Jamal *Live from Death Row* (1996)
  - Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)

- Damon Young's *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker: A Memoir in Essays* (2010)
- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)
- Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1902)
- Charles M. Blow, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2015)
- Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2019)
- H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah al-Amin), *Die Nigger Die!* (1965)
- Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives: A Memoir* (2019)
- Daniel R. Day, *Dapper Dan: Made in Harlem* (2019)
- James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972)
- Wes Moore, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010)
- Damon Young, *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker: A Memoir in Essays* (2010)
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (1994)
- Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (2008)
- Curtis M. Blow, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2014)
- Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853)
- Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (1971)
- Will Smith, *Will Smith Will* (2021)
- Colin Powell, *It Worked for Me* (2014)
- Harry Belafonte, *My Song: A Memoir of Art, Race, and Defiance* (2012)
- Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2017)
- Verdon Jordan, *Vernon Can Read!: A Memoir* (2008)
- Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965)
- Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (1996)
- James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1995)
- Carmelo Anthony, *Where Tomorrows Aren't Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope* (2021)
- Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (1981)
- Darnell L. Moore, *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* (2019)
- W.E.B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois* (1968)
- Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2001)

- Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1944)
- Joe Louis, *Joe Louis, My Life* (1978)
- Jarvis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen: A Biography* (1997)
- John L. Lewis, *Walking with The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (1998)
- Sammy Davis, Jr., *Sammy: The Autobiography of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (2008)
- Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography of Jackie Robinson* (1972)
- Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (1975)
- Nat King Cole, *Straighten Up and Fly Right: The Life and Music of Nat King Cole* (2020)
- Little Richard, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Authorized Biography* (2003)

## **Appendix B**

### **Excerpt from Novice Level 1-Personal Narrative**

A spiritual foundation instilled in me at birth. As I have grown in church, learning how everyone who is currently breathing has a calling from God; causes me to examine myself, in hopes of discovering my calling. While searching for my more higher purpose, I began to feel as if I was called to be an artist. Wherever there was a piano, the urge to play felt like a heatwave flowing through my body. As it came to writing, wherever my thoughts went, the pen followed. Whenever I would write, every idea placed on paper was often aligned with how I felt emotionally; topics ranged from societal issues to self-confidence. As time went by writing felt as natural as a mother holding her newborn. As the arts held onto me, my purpose in life became clear as day; my calling is to impact many lives through music, and spoken word.

As stated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.” In other words, one’s purpose does not lie between lines of settling for the bare minimum. Nor does one’s life purpose consist of them working in a career that pays well but drains them internally. Sadly, many have failed to live to their fullest potential as a consequence of allowing distractions, setbacks, mediocrity, or fear to dictate their future. On the bright side, as long as one is living the chance for them to fulfill their life purpose remains. In addition to that, some believe a person will go through the process of reincarnation until they have completed their task. Gratefully I was able

to have the opportunity to seek, and potentially fulfill my life purpose, through almost allowing a fatal defect to define who I was as a person.

For a period, fear prevented me from sharing my gifts. Fear of my works not being “good enough.” Fear of not receiving the recognition I felt I deserved. Fear of my works going astray. Fortunately, I was able to look beyond my fears to trust my intuition. In addition to that, I began to grow internally. While growing an abundance of self-love, and recognizing my self-worth, I began to grow who I was meant to become. Due to growing into who I was meant to become, I now understand the idea of, “what is meant for you will always be yours” from a perspective aside from the realm of a relationship.

Surprisingly, I remember the night I decided to showcase my arts to the worlds. On my phone, as I was analyzing a self-written poem, inspired by the works of Kendrick Lamar’s “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” I shocked myself. I was astonished. I was unaware of how capable I was of writing such a moving piece. As I read over the poem repetitively, all fears that were there were replaced with the courage to share what I had written to the world, via Instagram. Graciously, posting the poem, gave me an opportunity to experience a sense of notoriety. Aside from that, it was affirming to know I had the power to impact a person’s life. It was shocking to realize that my poetry could influence people I least expected to care or notice my work.

Alongside posting pictures of myself on Instagram, I also post things ranging from videos of me playing piano, to an original poem, or a simple motivational quote, in the hope of helping get a person through their day. Shockingly, Instagram has provided me with a platform that allows me to present myself to others without having to be pushy. To some, Instagram can be seen as a distraction from what is happening in the world, but I much appreciate it. Through Instagram, I can share God’s purpose for my life, my music, and my poetry.

As it is a task for one to seek their calling, having the ability to believe in who you are meant to be is primary. Dreaming, or aspiring to be something someday is the equivalent to planting a seed in the ground hoping for a plant to grow. As a water source to thrive in life, storms come in the form of temptations, and misfortunes. Fortunately, all storms do come to pass. As a result, the person one once was grows into who they were meant to be.

## Appendix C

### Excerpt from Intermediate Level 2 Personal Narrative

Growing up as a child and watching people lose people so close to them, I never believed I could experience the same thing, until four years ago, December, 2014, I lost someone so dear to me, my dad. On a Sunday morning, when I and my family were preparing to go to church, I saw my dad walk into the computer room, I followed him there and I saw him look up a term "Carcinoma". When he noticed I was looking, he quickly put up another page on the browser, then he looked at me and smiled saying "go and prepare for church like everyone else", I obeyed and went to get ready for church. When I got back home from church, I looked up the meaning of "Carcinoma" on my laptop, I was in great shock when I saw what Carcinoma meant and tears began to drop from my eyes. Then I thought, "Could daddy have cancer?" I went to his room and asked him what Carcinoma meant, he looked so surprised and told me to sit down, he told me he has a little cancer and it was going to be treated, tears dropped from my eyes, he tried to console me but I did not stop crying, he told my mother to take me away and talk to me so he won't feel bad about his problem. My mother made everything sound and seem alright, I felt better, she told me it's a really small tumor and its going to be removed by the doctor before I know what is happening, she made me totally forget about the incident.

A week later, I went back to my boarding high school. Unfortunately for me, almost every teacher kept emphasizing on the term "cancer", there was a book that was published about cancer titled "Cancer is a serial killer", each time the word "cancer" was mentioned, I would remember my dad, one part of my mind will say he will die and the other part will say he will be treated, I kept listening to only the second part of my mind that said he will be treated. It was a really long term in school, especially since every lecturer talked about cancer. There was a bad news about a boy who lost his mother to cancer, this made me more worried. I talked to my guidance and counselor, Mr. Andrew Oba, because the problem was affecting my studies, Mr. Andrew assured me everything was going to be fine, he even let me use his phone to talk to my dad at home, since we weren't allowed to have phones in my high school. My dad was sounding alright like nothing was wrong with him, and that made me happy each time I talked to him.

The school's visiting day came a little while later, I was so desperate to see my parents, especially my dad and hear that the tumor has been removed. I was standing at the school's gate with my friends waiting on my parents to come with food and drinks for me, then I saw a car that looked so much like the car we use at

home, then I looked at the driver, he didn't look familiar, so I diverted my eye instantly and kept looking for my car, when the car that looked like mine got to my position, the window was rolled down then I saw my mum, I looked to the driver's seat and noticed someone I didn't think I have seen, I greeted my mum and the driver said "my son, how are you?" I looked closely and noticed it was my father, looking so skinny and had darker skin, I was so shocked, I said "dad! What happened to you? he just smiled and said "I will be fine, don't worry" I felt so bad. I got into the car and was so quiet, I didn't bother to ask if the tumor was removed, because it was obvious it wasn't removed. That was my worse visiting day ever.

It was vacation day, the term was finally over and I got my best result ever, I couldn't wait to show my dad my result, I saw cars come into the school with parents in them, pick up their children, some parents were sad, because their children had terrible results, and some others weren't cause their children had good results. I couldn't wait to see how happy my dad was going to be when he saw my result. I waited so long but I did not see anyone to come to pick me, I was so unhappy, because I was outside waiting for my parents for like six hours. Luckily for me, I sighted Mr. Andrew far away, then I ran to him, I begged him to help me call my parents to find out where they were, he did so reluctantly, probably he felt there was an emergency, because it is so unusual for my parents to take so long to come to pick me up, the only emergency that could come to his mind was my father's death. He called and my mum picked up the phone, and she said "daddy can not talk right now", I yelled "why not", Mr. Andrew tried to calm me down, but I refused to be calmed down, I began to cry so loud, then I heard "Olibro" from the phone, and there is only one person that calls me that, my dad, immediately, I stopped crying and said "daddy is that you?", he said "yes". I felt so relieved, I have never felt this relieved in my life. My mum apologized for not coming early because she's in United Kingdom, because of my dad's health, she said "uncle Ifeanyi will pick you, don't worry." Five minutes later, my uncle came, picked me up and took me home.

Two days into the holiday, 9 a.m. in the morning on a Tuesday, my family parish pastor came to our house. I and my siblings were so happy to see him, because he is so funny. He came in happy as usual, he made us all laugh so hard. Along the line I heard him say "we lost daddy today at exactly 8 am", I thought I did not hear well, then I heard my immediate elder sister scream, hearing that, I knew that I heard correctly. I felt so bad, I had never felt so bad in my whole life. I ran up to his room and grabbed a picture and cried out so loud, I couldn't believe I lost my dad.



## Appendix D

### Excerpt from Proficient Level Personal Narrative

It was the most defining moment in my Christian lifestyle, getting baptized. Being a part of the church has been a part of my life for 10 years. The church I attended is Greater New Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church. The experiences and lessons I have learned in the church have shaped me into the person I am today. In church there are many normative practices that Baptists perform. Some are boring and some are interesting. As a kid, the sermons and the general church service would serve no amusement or interest for me. Despite of the boring parts of church there were particular activities that interested me and other youth. One of these particular programs I wanted to participate in was communion. It was the fastest service in the church and best of all, church members would get bread and grape juice. See Elaine B. Richardson's (2004) wrote that "the study of African American rhetoric has been a significant advance in the field of communication, though relatively few scholars of African American rhetoric in speech communication have integrated African American rhetorical theories and methods to encase discussions of this culturally unique set of rhetorical experiences in Writing and Composition. Instead, a large number of African American rhetorical studies, textbooks, and monographs tend to offer engaging intellectual treatments of African American rhetoric within the limited purview of public address.

Seeing everyone eating the body of Jesus and drinking the blood of Jesus looked fun to me so I wanted to participate. I had to learn that there are spiritual requirements to be able to participate in Communion. My aunt would always tell me during communion, "You need to be baptized!" as she would tell the usher to not serve me. As time went by, more and more kids in the youth department were able to eat the bread and drink the cup, except me. I began to feel as if I had something to prove and I needed to prove that I believed in Jesus so I could start eating and drinking the blood and body of Christ on communion. Soon enough, I finally found out what I needed to do to participate in communion. I needed to confess in front of the church that I believed Jesus is my Lord and Savior! It seemed like every other Sunday there would be kids my age going up in front of the church to do this. I just didn't know when my time would come. Now the ultimate test of faith and allegiance to the church was being put to the test and I don't know if I was spiritually ready at the time. Saying that I believed in Jesus was one thing, but knowing in my heart and spirit that this was true was the real question.

I have reached the first step on my journey toward being able to participate in communion. It was the third Sunday on a Sunday school morning and I was filled with excitement because I was going to go in front of the church and confess my belief in Jesus. The way the process worked is the deacons would spread out chairs in the middle of the floor and the whole congregation would sing the hymn *Come to Jesus right now*. I was sitting in the front third row of the church, I was ready to come to the front and be the person that Jesus has called to officially join the church. The ritual officially has started and then after 1 minute of the congregation singing the song and the chairs being put out; I went to the front of the church and took a seat. Seeing everyone smile directly at me and clap for me had caused my spirit to become joyful and nervous at the same time. Soon enough, Pastor Riley came in front of me and directed me to stand. A few moments after, the music stopped and the chairs were put back. It was only me, the church and Jesus. He went on and asked "Jalen, do you believe that Jesus Christ Is your Lord and Savior that died on the cross for sins to give you everlasting life?" This was a simple "Yes" or "No" question. In the back of mind, I wondered what would happen if I answered "No" but I did not want to affect my reputation and cause the church to think I was some fool or fake-believer. I immediately answered "Yes" without hesitation to my pastor's question. I had felt a sense of guilt though because I knew that even though I said "Yes": I didn't know if I was ready to make such a big decision. Due to me confessing my belief of the lord I was then scheduled to be baptized on the next first Sunday. This was yet another exciting experience, one in which I knew I would never forget because I was inviting family and I was getting dipped in a bath tub full of water. I didn't know what to expect emotionally or spiritually but I knew it would be something I could never forget.

I have finally made it, the moment that will test if I really am a Christian believer. I woke up to an unusual Sunday breakfast from my family and words of encouragement and advice. The day was beautiful with the sky being blue and the sun shining bright. I was scheduled to get baptized right after Sunday morning church service before communion. As the day went by, I thought about how this experience would feel and how it would affect me. I had to get ready and change my clothes into a white robe over a white shirt, white socks, and shorts. I was wearing all white to show that I am a soul in need to be born again. The time has come, I go to the overflow room where the baptism pool is located and I await my baptism. The room is hot and filled with my family and church members. Members of the church choir started to sing spiritual songs. A minister read a bible verse pertaining to baptisms and I was prepared by one deacon and another minister to go in the water. I made three steps over a set of stairs and into the tub of water. The

water was cold and brisk. At that point, it was time for the baptism to happen. The minister said one last spiritual saying and then I was dipped into the tub filled with cold water. When coming out of the water, I felt replenished and proud. I was proud of overcoming my doubts and biases towards the event. I did not just get baptized to earn the privilege of participating in communion as I had first thought. Getting baptized was an opportunity to wash away my sins and gain hope for becoming a better and stronger person in God. Overall, looking back at this spiritual experience it has taught me a lot and has given me a passion to serve God. Despite of the sins and mistakes I still can make as a person, knowing that I have taken the opportunity to build a relationship with God is inspiring and helpful. This experience showed me that everything is not what it seems and taking a step back from my comfort zone is sometimes more beneficial than harmful.

## **Appendix E**

### **Excerpt from Advanced Level 4 Personal Narrative**

Thirty people have been killed by a weapon in Washington DC from the time I got out of high school, to the day I left for Morehouse College. It seems that when school stops being in session, Black people all over the city just get bored, and start to shoot each other. Almost every week I would see another shirt, with the deceased on the front, opening the gates of heaven. Every week I see the hashtag #E4, which means everything for. #E4Zion, #E4Face, #E4Stunna, #E4Jamia the list goes on and on, with no end in sight. Every week I see some new flowers on a curb, and every week I have to comfort a female friend, who is crying because she saw this coming, but did not do enough to help. It's not her fault though, what can she do? Her boyfriend seemingly chose the streets, and the streets returned the favor. However, half of deaths in these shootings are those who are innocent, those who are looking to escape. Children, the elderly, those who are college bound. Unfortunately, for one night I thought I was about to be on a shirt, with the hashtag #E4AJ being spread by my good friends like a virus.

It was my last week in DC, I was working all summer at Trader Joe's, so I let myself go to a school friend's graduation party. My old high school was very diverse, and it allowed me to meet all types of people, especially ones that lived very different types of lives than myself. My friend, Monae, was not going to college, so this high school graduation was a very big deal for her. I decided to come with my friends Latrell, Josh, and Knick. Josh and Knick were my friends

since middle school and I consider them brothers. Latrell however, was my brother's friend, and he was waiting for my brother to get off work, so he could meet us at the party. Latrell was from Maryland, so he wasn't used to the grimey, tense environment of DC. In the party there were some that I was acquainted with, but those are my main friends I was looking out for. Me and my friends were already on high alert, because this is a neighborhood where the police don't show up for anything in the area. Also, the owner of the house, Monae's aunt, is insane and cannot be trusted. Thankfully I learned these street smarts through experience, while some still have to learn. Towards the middle of the party, me and Latrell went outside to scan the block. Everyone who lived in the area seemed to be just getting off work and hanging around outside. While outside I noticed a group of 5 black guys in all black, with backpacks across the street, just staring at the party and the house. I made a note in my head to never let them completely out of my sight. I quickly told my other friends I was with, and they agreed that we need to keep an eye out for them.

DC's black culture is very much based on hatred. When people from impoverished areas start to become successful, whether it be a rapper, actor, or even going to college, the black citizens start to hate. It varies from case to case, but the successful who have escaped the DC area, know for a fact danger can come from afar and from your friends as well.

Later on in the night, me and my friends were sitting on the second floor porch when I saw out the corner of my eye, about two blocks away, a man pull out a weapon and let some shots into the air. People will still say to this day that it was fireworks that started the shootout, but I was the only one that saw the real spark that started this violent fire. Once the shots initially went off, me and my friends were in shock, and then were interrupted by the initial shooter yelling out "oh shit", and running as fast as he could in the opposite direction. I immediately thought of the 5 men in all black, and before I knew it, they all were rushing forward, pistols in hand, shooting back at what they believed was aggression at them. This all happened exactly like you think it would in a movie. Everyone in the party knew exactly what was going on. The half second of silence was interrupted by more gunfire, and everyone ran inside immediately from the front porch. My friend Latrell, who I had been assigned to protect, had ran into the bathroom for cover. Bullets flew into the house, smashing windows and scaring whatever ounce of courage I had left, out of my body. I had no control whether I would live or die, a stray bullet would most likely determine my fate. I had been trying to dodge altercation, keep my head down and earn money for school. The gunfire probably only lasted for about 20 seconds, but it felt like 5 minutes for me.

Afterwards in the house was complete turmoil, with there being everyone trying to find their friends, and trying to find their enemies as well, because at the time, no one knew the source of the shots fired except for us on the front porch. When discussing with my friends, we shared how it peaked our adrenaline, to actually see a shootout, as opposed to hearing it from a unknown assailant, masked by darkness. With all this confusion, the owner of the house, Monae's aunt, went around the house to identify everyone. Monae was too drunk to tell her aunt that we were her classmates. Monae's friends insisted that we knew her, and in fact belonged there at the party. At this point me and Latrell were ready to leave, but my friends Knick and Josh wanted to stay because the male female ratio was in our favor. Also with us was my acquaintance from school, Diddy. I would never leave my good friends in a hostile place by themselves, so I decided to stay.

About twenty minutes later on, as expected the police never showed up. The party turned into more of a relaxed social vibe, with my group and a group of women talking about our own perspectives on what happened. While we were talking, we heard Monae scream out, and Monae's aunt calling for all men that aren't family, to leave. At the time, I did not know why they were so angry. One of Monae's brothers rushed into the room, got within inches of our faces, and said "If you all don't leave right now, we bout to rob ALL y'all niggas". Me and my friends didn't flinch at all, but me, Latrell, and Diddy started to slowly walk down the stairs, with at least 20 people telling us walk faster. But couldn't increase my pace, because that would show that they are affecting me. Diddy ran the fastest, disappearing into an alley nearby. I walked quickly downstairs with Latrell in front of me, assuming my two friends were right behind me. Instead, another guy who lived round the area jumped the fence, looked me in the eye and said he was trying to fight me for what my friend did. My mind was racing, trying to figure out what Josh, Knick, or Latrell could have done to kill the mood to such a degree. Only days later did I realize they were talking about Diddy, someone who I would have never fought for. But for my two friends I was not going to leave them no matter what, and Latrell was my brothers friend, so he wasn't getting left either. I had to look him in his eyes before we started to fight. Right as the first punch was thrown, a group of girls that knew me rushed in, trying to protect me. I quickly gathered myself and looked around for my friends, who were gone. In their place I say 3 guys in all black with guns, seemingly protecting the block from another attack. It dawned on me if I fought around here, there would be no winning, even if I won the fistfight. I called Latrell, and he swooped around the street and picked me up. I called my other friends, who escaped lightly with a broken nose.

After a long discussion with my friends about 3 days later, we put together the facts. The reason we were kicked out so quickly was that Diddy slapped Monae's butt, which pushed her down the stairs. This was understandable to why there was so much hostility. But everyone thought that me and my friends were with Diddy, which, we most definitely weren't. This night was an explosive way to end the summer, and it reminded me that I'm not even safe in my own city, so I need to be on high alert in Atlanta, a city that I know nothing about.