

Branching Out and Coming Back Together: Exploring the Undergraduate Experiences of Young Black Women

A CONVERSATION WITH VICTORIA JAMES,¹
IMANI MARRERO, AND DARLEEN UNDERWOOD

In January of 2010, Harvard Educational Review editor Chantal Francois sat down at a Manhattan diner with three young black women, two of whom were her former students at a New York City high school. Chantal invited the women to come together and share their experiences as freshmen at predominantly white institutions along the East Coast. While each of these young women drew largely from her own experiences transitioning into different college settings, each highlights themes from both Fordham's and Kynard's research—including the emotional stress that being confined by labels can cause and the importance of finding a cipher from which to draw strength. In this conversation, the women shed the layers they typically don in white educational settings, instead creating a space where they can be real, find comfort, and speak from the core. What's more, their stories echo the themes of talking black, talking back, fictive kinship, and complicity, which Iris Carter Ford's commentary describes as central to conversations about black women in America today. From Victoria, Imani, and Darleen, we hear firsthand accounts of the commitment to struggle and the communal strength that continue to exist in the sacred spaces carved out by young black women in American educational institutions.

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Chantal: *I wanted to begin by getting some of your reactions to the articles by Signithia Fordham and Carmen Kynard in this symposium. Did anything in these articles stand out to you? Did you have any particular reaction to these pieces?*

Victoria: I remember what [Fordham was] saying about how people acting black or people acting white—the first lady that started that, [she described] how black people are afraid to be smart, in elementary school and in high school—that people *are* afraid of being teased, they’re afraid of getting the highest grade in class, which is stupid, but they want to be in the popular crowd. Once you’re in college, people start growing up. People actually do want to succeed. I feel like, me personally, I feel like since I go to a predominantly white school, I have to work harder to prove myself. People stereotyped me. People stereotype each other. It’s just common knowledge. You do it, we all do it. I have to be in class with these people . . . always raising my hand, always answering questions. I don’t want to be that black girl, sitting there, she’s a black girl, she got in because she’s a minority. She got in because they have to diversify. Some people they do it, they do it without even thinking, they’re just kind of ignorant in a way. They’re just in that setting, and they think some black people are just ignorant, and I want to prove them wrong.

Darleen: I also think part of [the issue] is your comfort zone. When you’re around people that look just like you, you feel like, you know, you’re all the same no matter what. When you’re around people who aren’t like you, me being a black woman at college, and then being in a predominantly white school, I feel like, like Victoria said, you have to prove yourself. But when you think about it, it goes back to how comfortable you are with being around that group of people in the classroom. I know I had a problem with that, too; I was sitting in the back of the classroom, wouldn’t say anything, and after a while, I realized, what’s the point? I’m here to get an education. So you have to think about, well, they’re here, they’re paying their money to be here, no matter how much money they paid to get here, I’m here too, so I have to get my education too. Being a part of what you’re comfortable with, you have to step out of it.

Imani: I agree with what you’re saying because at orientation I cried, because I walked into the room, I was so late, I was upset, so I walked into the room and it was like an auditorium filled with hundreds of white people and their parents, and I was like, “What the hell?” I freaked out. I mean, there were some black kids in the back, like two, two, and at the whole orientation there were five minorities. And I ran to my room and I cried and I cried, and I was like, “What the hell, I can’t do this.” One of the RAs, the people who was leading the [orientation], she was black, and . . . there was one black girl and then there was one black guy . . . and I went to her room, and we were talking and she was telling me how it’s hard, but you have to get yourself to not focus too much on that. Make friends with both black and white people. But open yourself up to that . . . It’s so hard. In all of my classes there are only . . . the most is like two black girls. And I’m one of them. I’m like the only one, and I sit in the back; I’ve never sat in the front. I just didn’t want to bring that attention to myself.

Chantal: *So, it sounds as though attending a school that was predominantly white was a new experience for you. Maybe we should talk a bit more about that? How was it different from what you are used to?*

Victoria: At the end of the day, all three of us, we all knew we were going to go to a predominantly white school. Like, me personally, my first choice was Howard. I had an interest in an HBC [Historically Black College], but they weren't giving me no money . . . I knew that I was going to, I knew kind of what I was getting myself into. I never really lived in a predominantly white community. I only lived in a minority community. I really didn't associate myself with . . . there was none around. I knew what I was getting myself into. And I knew that I would have to associate with people. I couldn't just be with the same, I just had to change . . . I knew that I would have to be surrounded by a lot of white people. I knew there wouldn't be so many people, so many black people in my class. I knew what I was getting into. I wanted to challenge myself, to see if I could just hang out with anybody, no matter what race or color. It wasn't hard for me, but I felt like I was the one trying to branch out and they were just kind of looking at me. At first I did but then I was holding back a little. No one was trying to make friends with me, I was going to everybody; it was like a one-way street. But I felt like I gotta stop, I'm like the only black person, basically, in my dorm. But the people in my dorm, they're really cool. I was like, oh, they would knock on my door, and it was cool, you know?

For me, it's different [than what I was used to], because I can see [that these students] are more privileged than me . . . I appreciate stuff way more [than them]—I'm not generalizing, but my roommate, she would wear shoes just one time and then throw them away, and me, I'm wearing these shoes until I can't wear them no more!

[Also] there's no black fraternities at my school; you can pledge them outside but it's just white fraternities at my school, [and] most of the parties, they are white. They don't play reggae—I like reggae—they don't play reggae or stuff like that. They play pop music. Luckily, I like that. Some of my black friends, they don't like that, they'll say, "Oh, it's a black, or it's a white party." But you know I feel like, if I wanna have fun, I wanna have fun, it doesn't matter, I'll go. You like to have fun, I like to have fun, it doesn't matter. I'll go to the black party too because I like that music, too, but I don't really care who's having fun. Like the frats, you have to know some of the brothers to get in the front of the line. I know some of them but I don't know all of them. Sometimes black people, you have to wait in a line or stuff like that. And the white people be going because they know the brothers and stuff. You can see the segregation because they say, "Oh, you gotta wait, hey Johnny boy, hey Tommy Tom," and they're going by, "Hey," and the black people, they get mad, because, hey, I've been waiting in line for, like, an hour to get in the party and Susie and Jim just walk into the party! But they knew what they were getting into, they knew it wasn't an HBC. So, you know, I knew what I was getting into.

Imani: White people, they are a trip . . . One time, I was at work and we were closing up. I work at a smoothie place, and it closes at 5. It's 4:58—4:58!—and the fruit and stuff is packed up. [This white lady] she's like, "Oh, are you still open?" I'm like, "You see me turning off the sign, you see me cleaning up, you see that we're putting stuff away . . ." She just got on my nerves.

Victoria: I would do that same thing—if the door's open, Imani, if the door's open, and I want a smoothie, if the door's open I feel like, me personally, it's okay to do. I don't think that's white. If the door's unlocked, and I want a smoothie, I see that one apple, you could put it in a blender right quick and just give me a drink.

Darleen: I think that [the transition to college was] just a big battle for me . . . There's just a whole lotta white people. I'm a cashier at the dining hall and I hear all the conversations as they come by me. I'll be swiping their card or whatever and they'll look up, and they look at you weird, and they stare, and they'll turn their head a little bit, and I turn my head back, and I get a lot of that, too. You hear the conversations about, "Oh, I'm gonna buy this new Range Rover or this new this." And my dining hall it's really segregated, too. I did some research about this and people, they come inside or whatever, a whole group of people—there will be black and white together—and ultimately they'll all split up.

Chantal: What has the transition been like, in terms of your classes?

Darleen: It was a big change for me. Just having to sit in the classroom and hear the professor—he'll say something about black history, and—it is true—they'll just look at me like I'm responsible for every black person in the world. But instead of just sitting there and putting up a fight, I answer the question as best as I can. And I always say, "Me, me, I, I," because that's who I can stand for. It was a big problem for me, to sit in the classroom and even sit there, because you get all these glares. It might not be glares like they're looking at you in the wrong way but you feel like they're looking at you in the wrong way. You have to do a little bit extra.

Victoria: I'm in two race classes, and every time we talk about here [New York City] or some ghetto, I'm like, "Uh, I don't even live like that." But I answer the question to the best of my ability. And I feel like a lot of minorities having jobs—I don't even have a job, I need a job next semester, so I'm broke, so I need a job—I feel like, in my school, you can see the segregation. The only people that are really integrated are the football team and the basketball team—the athletes. They're together because they're cool, but other than that, white people stay in their chairs and the minorities all together. My associate, she's hanging out with the white people, and people say that she's fake . . . she don't even know it . . . People come in with the, "Oh, she's fake, she's hanging

out with the white people. She doesn't know what color she wants to be." She knows she's black, but she wants to hang out with these people. I don't really care. People just care too much about what other people are doing. If she wants to hang out with the blacks, whites, Asians, Muslims—it doesn't matter. That's her preference. Why do you care so much? Don't care; as long as you're happy, that's all that matters. I don't care; worry about yourself.

Chantal: A few of you have talked about feeling out of your comfort zone. When you have these types of experiences, particularly as a black woman, what have you been doing? How do you deal?

Victoria: So my roommate's white, right? And sometimes she will have her friends, and I will come in and I feel uncomfortable. We'll talk for a little bit but then there'll be an awkward silence and I hate awkward silences. Sometimes I'll be on my computer—you know, watching a movie—and I'll just leave. If I'm not comfortable, then I don't want to stay in an awkward position. It's crazy . . . that's why I want to go to a single room. Sometimes her white friends will come, my black friends will come, we're talking, "Da, da, da, da," and my black people will come at the same time. You can actually see the segregation—my black friends talking and her white friends might be in the room. It's really hard but that's it. They're talking about something else and we don't really interact. We say, "Ha, ha," and that's it. We just don't interact, and it's just uncomfortable sometimes. I'll just end up talking to my friends; we're not really cool like that.

It's like, she's cool, and I have white friends. But me and her, we just don't have similar interests; the only thing we really have in common is class. She lives in Cali, I live in New York; she is really privileged, I was in the middle; she washes her hair every day, I wrap my hair, don't wash it for two weeks so, we just had too [many] differences.

Imani: There's one incident that really pissed me off. My roommate's friend, she has a car, she's loaded . . . so she came down to visit Stephanie for the weekend, for the football game we have. My friend Jackie [was over]—she's black—and I left Jackie in the room and went to the bathroom. [My roommate's friend] has, when she—she's met me before—we met twice—but she came into the room and saw Jackie and was like, "Oh hi, Imani." Jackie looks nothing like me! And everything black, [this girl] calls "ghetto." Everything.

Darleen: [When I first arrived] it was like, I'm going to explore [college]. Because, you know, at the end of the day, I can do something about [the situation] or I can do something about it in my way, which is thinking above that—doing what I have to do for myself and not worrying about the other stuff like Gabby was saying. But now I have people I can talk to about it or, I don't know, just thinking above it and thinking more positive, how I can benefit myself from [college], like learn from it and not being ignorant about situations, or

not reading too much into situations because they're white. So I just think, you know, [I try to] benefit myself, and learn from situations . . .

I dealt with the roommate situation, too. I had to switch roommates. Because my roommate, at first it was cool—she told me where she was from in Connecticut, and I see her pictures and she has no black friends; she's never really experienced diversity. She was really very different, and I'm telling her where I'm from, I'm from New York, and she was asking about it, and whatever, and after that we were cool. And then it was just like, there was nothing. I would sneeze and nothing. She would sneeze and, "God bless you," and then, like, I'd be in front of the door and I'd look up and she was there and I would move, and she would go by. It was stuff like that. And my friends were like, "I think she's racist," and I was thinking, maybe . . . uncomfortable and stuff like that. So I let it go for a while. I introduced her to my sister and it was a fake little "Hi"—it wasn't really welcoming. And then her family was there, and I would say hi and whatever, and her parents were really cool. Her mom asked me if I wanted to go to the Cheesecake Factory, so I was like, "No," and whatever, but even before I could say no, my roommate was like, "No, she wouldn't want to go." Instead of me taking it to the high extreme . . . and being from where I'm at, I can be crazy . . . I was just going to remove myself from the situation. One of my other friends . . . [I stay with her now] being with her, and talking to her, it was better for me anyway. And when I left my roommate, I told her it was nothing against her. She's a great person.

Chantal: Can you tell me more about your relationships with other black women on your campus? What has that been like for you?

Darleen: It ain't no better. At first I was thinking, well, you know, maybe if I can't hang with all white people then I'll stay with my people. Bad idea, because I thought I would be more comfortable with my black people, [but] I found that there was a lot more drama. I mean, being with myself would be better than being with a whole bunch of black people every single day. I love my black people, but I feel like I have a whole bunch of friends now [of all races]. Before, it was a whole bunch all together, but I feel like there's a lot of drama, because if [you talked] to one of your friends who's white, they [would] ask, "Why are you talking to that person?" You know what I'm saying? And then it's different but you don't want to feel like you're . . . I find that just having a mix of friends is the best way to go about it. I feel like when you're with your people there's a lot of controversy, because you feel like you don't want to upset them, because that's your crew, but you don't want to neglect them if you've got your new white friends. It's a whole lot to battle. But I found that a lot of my friends are diverse together.

Imani: I agree with what you're saying because right now my best friend is white, but I don't hang out with her as much as I would like to because I don't want to upset the black people . . . But for next semester, I really want to hang

out with her and her friends. Because, it's like a small minority but there's so much drama! Relationships, and what's been going on with that one, and this one's gay, and then they were going out but they broke up, and [then they went out]. And like, damn.

Chantal: *So, is it hard because there are so few black students?*

Darleen: It's like you don't know how to handle it and not offend this group of people. And they're your only people, and I think it's a lot to handle.

Imani: [And] if [a black student] hangs out with predominantly white people they get called "whitewashed."

Darleen: Yeah!

Imani: It's like it's a crime, like, damn! You just want to hang with this one [person], and it should be okay!

Darleen: If this group of girls finds out that this one is trying to "act white," they say, "Oh, she's bougie, and she's trying to act all that." Like I had one of my other black friends, we were really good friends now—but there was one girl she thinks she's bougie because she talks to a lot of white people. I was talking to [the girl] and I laughed—we laughed. So I laughed, and my friend called me and said, "Hey Darleen," and I was like, "Hi."

"You was talkin' to her? I know you wasn't talkin' to her."

And I was like, "Excuse me, I can talk to whoever I want to!"

But she was like, "You need to keep it on our side, straight black." I wanted to flip off then but I was like, "We're in Richmond," so, you know, I had to relax.

Victoria: I don't feel that way [about other black students]. I'm in a group, actually, me and five of us, we made up a group called Ebony Coalition. One of us passed away, but we made up a group and that's my really close friends. I'm in Posse, too.² I have a lot of diverse friends; they, like, my white friends come into my room, and it's, like, chill, like whatever, we know we're in a predominantly white school. If you make it awkward, it's going to be awkward for four years. We're going to be here for four years—this is my home, for four long years—so I feel like . . . I go to the gym with my white friend, Veronica, but it doesn't matter. [Or] I'll be talking to my black friends and say, "Oh I can't go out with white boys; they ignorant, like what are they thinking?" They live in this privileged, isolated, indoctrinated world, so that's why I'm thinking about that. So [I can share how] I feel about this and they tell me that; we don't hold back. But I'm gonna tell them how I feel. We have so many conversations about everything.

We make sure to bring them in the conversation.

I love them so much, but I feel like, if black people would feel more comfortable in a white setting, then white people would feel more comfortable in

a black setting. They make you feel included; some white people, they don't. Me and my friends, we make sure that they're included. Why would you bring them around and then isolate them? I want you to be included, that's why you're around me. So, [I ask] "What are you thinking about this?" If you're feeling uncomfortable, why would I bring you around? When I come around your friends, you can make me feel comfortable in the same way.

Chantal: Tell me more about the Ebony Coalition, tell me all about it.

Victoria: The Ebony Coalition—it was me and a group of friends, me, my friend Janae, Khalida, Brianna, the girl who passed away, Teresa, and my other friend Sabrina, a Puerto Rican woman. We were all in my room, we're all black—Sabrina just came in—we're all black, we always hang out together. [Sometimes] we'll bring people in but it's always us. But we were sitting in our room one time, everybody knows us, and we [decided that we] need a name for ourselves. My friend Khalida, she's like, "Oh, let's name ourselves the Ebony group, we're all shades of black and I was like, "Yeah." I was thinking of another name, or something like that and my friend, she was like, "Ebony Divas," but that's second grade. So they would always come over my room and do homework, so [once] I was looking up "coalition"—I didn't know what it means—and I was like, oh, "Ebony Coalition," because that was like a group. Ebony Coalition. Everybody knew who we was and when our friend Brianna passed away—she was a part of Ebony Coalition . . .

We're not just the black girls who stick with the black people; we're not out to impress people. I feel like we're the strong, independent women who like to branch out but come back together. I really love them. We go out to different branches and stuff like that. So you can branch out but you always know that you have us—you know, wherever you want to go, to Africa or Puerto Rico or wherever, and always come back—you have that support system.

Chantal: How do you support each other?

Victoria: I mean, we all supported each other when Brianna died. She passed away in her dorm room and we had to have a funeral that same day, for the school. We had to speak and everything. That's when we all really got together and started bonding, so we have that. If you have a problem, at school . . . we're all good at different issues, different subjects. Or if you have a problem with somebody else and you don't want to tell them by yourself, I'll go with you. If you have a problem with some boy, you know, I'll tell him, I'll string him up! If you want somebody to talk to . . . Some of us have family, but some of us don't. We're your sister if you have a problem with boys, emotions, whatever. If you want to cry, just call me, I'll hold you. It's college so we're not that far away. If you want me to come and hang out and stay with you that night because you feel alone, just call me—you know I will come. 'Cause I'll have your back

always. Even if I'm mad at you and you need me that much . . . my sister, she needs me, so I'm coming right there. Whatever you need, I'm there.

Chantal: *The Ebony Coalition seems to be a little different than the relationships among black students that we were talking about before. Why?*

Imani: I just think people expect you to hang out with them because you look like them, not necessarily because they like one another. That's the major thing. So if you have a bunch of people who just hang out with each other but don't really like each other, because they don't want to be alone, then that's just gonna make drama.

Darleen: You have to be open to stuff like that, because when you're the only one that's open to being diverse . . . you can be who you want to be when we're together, no matter what, and that's how I feel . . . Like when you [Victoria] were talking, I was like, "Yeah, yeah, that's true." But when you're the only one who feels that way, it makes you feel lost. Because not everybody feels the same way you are even if you do look like me. That's difficult, and that's something that you have to handle too. But that's one thing I'm trying to work on. I know I'm open to things like that, but I just try to open my other friends up to that same thing. And if they don't, you know, you just can't be that close.

Chantal: *Professor Fordham writes about two young women, Chloe and Brittany, who are both suffering emotionally in high school because they feel confined by the way that other people see them. Have any of you felt challenged, in high school or in college, in a similar way? Or, have you seen other people struggling with these issues?*

Darleen: One girl who lives in my dorm now, from Arkansas, and she's black. A lot of my friends, they always ask me whether her hair is real. We all know that her hair isn't real. So my friends, they saw what her parents [looked like], and we can see that she's black.

When I asked [her], "What are you?" she told me that she was mostly white, and a little bit black. I think her hair's black. I know hair.

[Then, once I asked her,] "What kind of hair do you use?"

[She said] "You mean, what kind of shampoo do I use?"

We know. It's really hard for her to embrace her black side. She wants . . . it's really hard . . . I don't know why. It bothers a lot of my other friends that she won't really embrace it.

But then in my head, [I think] if she gets to the point where she can embrace her black side, what is that gonna make us look like? As long as you know you're black and you're doing you.

And maybe she—I mean, people talk about her thinking that that works, I feel that, but I don't know. I just think that being black in a predominantly white college makes you stronger; it makes you confront the idea that, your

identity, making you aware that you *are* black. Maybe it helps you embrace your black side. You don't need to be white, but you want to, it makes you stronger in all types of ways.

Victoria: Why she doesn't want to accept her black side? They don't wanna go back, they probably don't wanna go back to where they were. They want to go higher on the scale . . . they are gonna work for, they wanna get back in; me, personally, I have to work; I'm not just given everything. I have to work for what I get. That's why I have to work hard for everything.

I think for me, me and a lot of my black friends, it was so sad but true. A lot of us, we don't have our fathers in our lives, and like—everybody's shaking their heads now!—it's just so sad. A lot of people, they have this picture-perfect family with the picket fence and the dog and everything, and I don't have that. Of course, I wish my father was there. Why, why would you conceive me and you're not there? [But] I'm not gonna be a [product of it]. It's that story: This is my family and my father's on drugs, and I'm just here, me and my mom and my sister. I'm not gonna be on that road that someone else goes through. I'm just going to prove you wrong. My father's in jail, but I'm not going to be like that.

I hear my white friends say, "Oh, my father's gonna pick me up today." I'd be jealous. I never had that. "My father's gonna give me a bag," or "He gave me a hooptie . . ." Girl, give me a hooptie, give me a bike, I don't care. I don't care! Some of them are so, so privileged, they don't understand what they have. I would be so appreciative, not that I—I love my family, but some of the material [things] . . . they don't really appreciate it.

Imani: Like what Vicky was saying, I have this one class. It was this girls' class—but they, there would be side conversations, because, you know, girls talk or whatever. They'd be like, "Oh yeah, my dad did this," or "My dad did that," and it would drive me crazy, like, "Why can't I have that?" And it got to the point where I started going to therapy. I would come to class crying, because I couldn't take how my life is so different from theirs, and how I felt like I didn't belong here. There was no part of this school that was like, Imani, you belong *here*. I just wanted to leave. So I started going to therapy because I felt like I needed to be there and get on the track where I wanted to be.

It got to the point where I couldn't even look out the window because, I couldn't see them, white people, and it was just driving me crazy. I couldn't see . . . I couldn't go to class because the thought of getting up, getting out of bed, made me cry. I couldn't look out. It was after Girls' Stories, I think I had another class. I think it was Tuesday, I went to therapy and I said, "I need help. I can't function." And I'm in [therapy] now.

Victoria: I'm glad you went there because for some people, they're just miserable. So at least you're able to go.

Chantal: *It's interesting that you were in a class called Girls' Stories. You would feel like that's the place where you could tell your story! But then it seems like the opposite happened, being there.*

Imani: Yeah, because it's like, my story is so different . . . I feel like if I were to say something, it sounds like I'm complaining. I feel like I am, it's like, "Why can't I have a dad? Why can't I have a picket fence and all that? Why can't my stepfather get a job? (But that's a whole other story.) So it's just unfair. I felt like it was unfair that I came to it and they're here and I came to it and I'm here. It's just . . .

Chantal: *You're just reminding me of something. I don't know if this is something that you've ever felt, but I think that one of the challenges for me was that my parents came from out of the country, and so they never really dealt with these issues of identity. They were just like, "It's all about school; it doesn't matter how you feel—you just have to do well." So then it was really good to find friends in college who I could talk to about these issues. Have you been able to talk to your families about the challenges that you face at school?*

Victoria: I talk to my sister . . . maybe because she's more my age, I mean, so she can understand me more, and she went to an HBC. I can talk to her more. Of course, she would give me the side of the black people because she goes to an HBC. I really wanted to go to an HBC, because I was born around that. I feel like I'm glad I went to a school with a more diverse population; if you stay with all the same people, you get that same mind-set. You can say that you have your own mind-set but it's the same as the other people. And the world is not just one color, you know . . .

Some people don't wanna hang around with black people because there's drama and stuff like that. There's drama because people told you there was drama. You say, "No, I don't want no drama, there's not gonna be any drama." People say that they have to fight, just because they are black. It's so ignorant. Oh—people say this: "I'm from Brooklyn. I'm going to beat somebody up." Why do you say that? You sound ignorant. I hate when people say that. You're mad when people stereotype you, but you're just feeding into that stereotype. So people say, "She's whitewashed because she's successful." Ignorant. I think we need to change that. Because, if people are just stereotyping you . . . if people feed into it, the more they feed into it, the more they're gonna be right.

Imani: My mom went to community college; my stepfather said he went to Pace but I don't know about all that because I never asked him. I don't talk to them about school stuff because they can't really, they can't give me advice about what I'm going through so I feel like I'm on my own and stuff. I have to buy my books, buy my computer, buy a camera. I have to get a job.

Darleen: I'm on my own.

Victoria: Well, you have a little sister; does [she] ask you stuff?

Darleen: She's struggling herself because, like, I'm her mom, so me being away is hard for her. Being at home is stressful; because when I'm there, everybody is so fake. My family is so dysfunctional, it's not funny. When I'm home, they cheese and they say, "Oh, she's in college, so we have to act like everything's fine," and I'm like, I'm not stupid. I can read all of that. So when I'm home my sister's looking at me like, yeah, I know. I got mad the other day and said, "I can't wait to go back." I started crying, it made me feel bad, because I know when I leave, everything's gonna fall apart for her because I'm not there. It's a lot for me to handle, because I can't go to my stepfather and say much because he's been in jail most of his life. My brother, he has no family, he's just out of this world. I have my sister to talk to, but she's still bothered by the fact that I'm not going to be there all the time. It's really hard.

I have to focus on my schoolwork, and I think about my sister at home. She could go crazy any day because I'm not there . . . That's how attached we are to each other, so . . . I have to do most things on my own and do things for her when I come back here.

I think I could go crazy being in Richmond too. You have your friends who are there, who can relate to you, but they have their own problems. And at the end of the day, nobody's story is your own, so it eats up at you in your head. On top of that, you're black at an all-white college, so it's like everything just becomes a whole bunch. People want to just escape from everything and the best way to do that is go in there and escape from everything.

Chantal: *Do you think that something like the Ebony Coalition—even if it wasn't just the girls who were black—would be helpful?*

Imani: I have a group like that but it's not as tight. It's like me and my friend Shelby, she's white. I love her so much, we connect so much. It's like we got each other . . . When she broke up with her boyfriend and I broke up with [mine] . . . she just got me through it and you never get tired of it. She just loves hearing me complain about stuff, and we're really close.

Victoria: My friends are [helpful]. I have many associates but I have my friends . . . It feels so good to talk about how you feel rather than keeping it all inside—that burden just adds up and adds up. It feels so good to talk to someone. It could be a therapist, it could be Facebook, it could be the phone, your mother, your sister—whatever. As long as you're talking to somebody.

Chantal: *So, as you think about your experiences in school, as black women, is there anything else that you want to share?*

Victoria: I'm a woman, I'm a black person, and I'm . . . I have to work hard, I'm a black female, so I'm just on the bottom of the list, but I'm gonna climb

my behind up the ladder. If I don't, then I'm just gonna sit there and be miserable. I don't wanna do that. I want to be a successful black woman. I feel like, if I want that, then I'm going to have to work hard for it. But I wanna work hard for it. I'm a black woman; I'm going to do whatever I want to. I'm not gonna be a statistic . . . I'm not gonna get pregnant; I'm gonna go to graduate school.

I can be—as a people, we can be—so much better than that. I don't want to get that welfare check every month. I want to get my own paycheck. I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom—I want to work for my money. And just be like, I want to be equal. If I don't [work], why complain, “Well, I'm not getting this,” if they're not even trying?

Chantal: *Anything else?*

Victoria: Black power.

[laughter]

Notes

1. This participant's name has been changed to protect her identity. All acquaintances mentioned by “Victoria James” have been given pseudonyms.
2. The Posse Foundation provides full financial, academic, and social support to undergraduate students. It places students in cohorts of ten students who collaborate on projects during their college career.

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