

---

7-1-2010

## A Composite Counterstorytelling: Memoirs of African American Military Students in Hawaii Public Schools

Kimetta R. Hairston

*Penn State University-Harrisburg*, kimettarh1@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Hairston, K. R. (2010). A Composite Counterstorytelling: Memoirs of African American Military Students in Hawaii Public Schools. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(4), 783-801. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1181>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## A Composite Counterstorytelling: Memoirs of African American Military Students in Hawaii Public Schools

### Abstract

There are social, educational and behavioral problems for African American students in Hawaii public schools. Utilizing Critical Race Theory as a lens for analysis, the perceptions and experiences of these students regarding race, ethnic identity, military lineage, and self-definition are addressed. A composite counterstory of the researcher's and 115 African American students' experiences and reflections is portrayed through two siblings' memoirs. The impact of the counterstory challenges readers to see similar themes, perceptions, and experiences of being Black, military- affiliated, and a student in Hawaii in a story format as all events are integrated into two experiences, one male and one female.

### Keywords

African American, Critical Race Theory, Counterstory, Military, Hawaii, and Narrative Inquiry

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## **A Composite Counterstorytelling: Memoirs of African American Military Students in Hawaii Public Schools**

Kimetta R. Hairston

Penn State University-Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA

---

*There are social, educational and behavioral problems for African American students in Hawaii public schools. Utilizing Critical Race Theory as a lens for analysis, the perceptions and experiences of these students regarding race, ethnic identity, military lineage, and self-definition are addressed. A composite counterstory of the researcher's and 115 African American students' experiences and reflections is portrayed through two siblings' memoirs. The impact of the counterstory challenges readers to see similar themes, perceptions, and experiences of being Black, military-affiliated, and a student in Hawaii in a story format as all events are integrated into two experiences, one male and one female. Key Words: African American, Critical Race Theory, Counterstory, Military, Hawaii, and Narrative Inquiry*

---

### **Introduction**

A memoir often tries to capture certain highlights or meaningful experiences in one's life, often including a contemplation of the meaning of those events at the time of the writing of the memoir. The memoir may be more emotional and concerned with capturing a series of events, rather than documenting every component of a person's life (Zuwiyya, 2000). The following counterstory presents events, experiences, and perceptions of the researcher and participants that have been developed into a single composite memoir of one African American family's experiences in Hawaii and the public school system. The people in the story are not *real* but instead composites and are an intentional and exaggerated blending of people and places. counterstory is "writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144). The thoughts, feelings, and incidents experienced by the individuals in this story are taken directly from the data collected in interviews, personal conversations, and questionnaires. By presenting the data in this exaggerated manner, in which two siblings have a number of experiences with racism and military transience into Hawaii, the reader is challenged to examine the role of African American military students in Hawaii public schools.

#### *Memoirs of a researcher's intersecting roles*

When I arrived in Hawaii in June of 2003, I was on top of the world--above the rainbows that filled the perfect sky. When I go to a new place, I search for Black History, and when I arrived in Hawaii I tried to find the history of Blacks in the islands. As I searched for my history, I found that the local society in Hawaii placed my culture somewhere under the rainbow.

As an African American I came to Hawaii looking for peace and paradise. I did not realize that I would miss my culture so much. I saw other African Americans on the military bases, at church, in the beauty shops, and at functions specifically for African Americans, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Black Sorority Functions, and Black History Events. Still the presence of African Americans in Hawaii was very limited. When I discovered Dr. Jackson's (2001) book, *And They Came*, I learned the history of the first Blacks in Hawaii. Prior to reading this book, I had no prior knowledge of African American history in Hawaii. This book was the first sign for me, as an African American, that there were historical roots of my culture in the islands (Jackson).

As a military dependent (Navy wife and mother) in Hawaii, I became up close and personal with the military experience for the first time. During my first year in Hawaii, I lived off base because we were on a housing waiting list, and I am thankful for that experience. It gave me the chance and courage to explore the local culture of Hawaii away from "base life." After that year we did move on base, and for the first time in my life, I lived on a military installation, and I noticed how the base segregates the military community from the local community. For example, we shopped at our own stores, had our own medical and judicial facilities and everyone on base had one common factor; we were all military. We could leave the base as we please, however if you were an outsider, you did not have the same privileges to just enter our community. One fact that became clear to me very early was that the majority of African Americans in Hawaii were associated with the military, being either in the military, retired military, or once military-affiliated. It was irritating to always be associated with the military as a dependent; dependents were not active duty service members, we usually had civilian jobs, our children attended local schools, and we were just different from our active duty parents and spouses. Living in Hawaii as a military dependent gave me a chance to experience the segregation associated with the military. In Hawaii, the military status fell into a class category. Issues surrounding my military class were often questioned or challenged simply because of the military class.

As Black woman teacher in Hawaii, I was stereotyped; I was called loud, aggressive, and a "typical Black woman." African American students came to me and often told me that I reminded them of their mothers. Black female students formed a bond with me, and we talked about being Black women. However, my gender and ethnicity were never separate. I was always described as the "Black woman teacher" or the "Black lady" in Room 5C. Often, other Black women approached me to talk about personal needs and their experiences in Hawaii. When African American students got in trouble, the teacher and the administration came to me for advice. They stated that as a mother, military wife, and teacher, I probably understood what was going on with the Black kids at this particular school. They always emphasized that the Black female students connected better with me- a Black woman teacher. Questions and concerns surrounding my parents and students were consistently presented to me as the only Black teacher. I felt that I had to find solutions to the issues raised; I also wanted to conduct some research. As I transitioned from teacher to full-time doctoral student/researcher in Education, several issues arose from numerous encounters with other African Americans. The various intersecting roles described above prompted the research for this study. Berry (2002) explains that "one's life experiences influence all aspects of the research

process: the topic one chooses to research, the kind of research one chooses to do, how one interprets the data collected, and even the conclusion to which one comes” (p. 145). My memoirs and reflections from my experiences prompted curiosity to discover what other African Americans living in Hawaii were experiencing. As I explored and began to desegregate individual perspectives of African Americans, the theoretical and conceptual foundations for this paper were conceived.

As an educator, my focal point became African American military students in Hawaii public schools. Race and military lineage became the dominating factors in the study. Critical Race Theory (CRT) served as a lens, placing race at the forefront of this study and pointing out that race exerted its own unique influence on school experiences that allowed the personal construction of the students’ lives (Brown, 1993).

## Methodology

### *A critical race theory perspective*

Issues surrounding race were significant and recurring among the researcher and participants in the study. Critical Race Theory scholars focus explicitly on the psychological harm of racism on children of color. According to Delgado (1995), CRT begins with the notion that race is a normal part of society, and in many facets of life it cannot and should not be avoided. Ladson-Billings (2009) posits that the CRT approaches to education include equal and equitable education for all students, the consideration of the harmful effects of colorblind and race-neutral curriculum, and exposure of racism in the educational system. Moreover, CRT scholars acknowledge that voices are legitimate in research and they provide an arena for voices to be heard and believing that race, used as an analytical tool (rather than a biological or socially constructed category used to compare and contrast social conditions), can deepen the analysis of educational barriers for people of color (Sleeter, 2002).

Drawing from the discipline of CRT, I presented the data in a counterstory in order to allow others to get an understanding of the experiences in Hawaii schools for students who are Black and associated with the military. Yosso (2005) explains, “CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (p. 69). Reading the narrative experiences and seeing the response center around racial experience, it is necessary to use race as an analytical tool and argue that race and ethnicity are primary determining factors that affect a person’s status in American society. It is important to note that oppressive acts, ethnocentric views, and other experiences toward people of color in these narratives are based primarily on their race. By using CRT, researchers raise the issues of race that are often omitted by the dominant Eurocentric culture, and counter the stereotypical ways in which students of color are perceived and treated in public schools (Bell, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1997, Delgado & Stefancic, 2005; Delpit, 1995; West 2001). Using this theory exposes racial issues such as ethnicity and stereotypes within the students’ military association as well.

### *What is a counterstory?*

Critical race theorists utilize storytelling and counterstory to portray the lived experiences of others (Delgado, 1995). One of the most noted methods of counterstorytelling is the book *Race Matters*; West (2000) discusses issues ranging from affirmative action to strained relations within and between minority groups. Another scholar, Derrick Bell (1992), is renowned for using the counterstorytelling technique in his book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. In this book, Bell uses a range of stories from amusing to shocking to discuss and challenge racism in society. Finally, another example of this method was used by Patricia Williams (1998) in her book, *Seeing a Colorblind Future*. Williams uses both storytelling and counterstory as she draws on personal experiences of slave narratives to explore living in a so-called “color-blind” society. Such exaggerated counterstory places emphasis on color-blindness and allows readers to see the in-depth effects of the personal experiences as the dominant issues are retold from a composite viewpoint. The counterstorytelling method allows scholars to step outside of the realm of formal reporting and provide literary and narrative effects to give those who experience discrimination and oppression a voice (Bell; Delgado; Williams). Moreover the method aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones that are held by the majority.

The primary goal of counterstory is to provide a correlating link between diverse world views of people of color for those who are unfamiliar with their experiences and bring out the dominant issues found in the data collection (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). In this study, the dominant story that is being countered is that racist discourses perpetuate the idea that Blacks are second class citizens.

### *The research purpose and question*

The lack of data addressing the implications of race and the experiences of students who are affiliated with the military in Hawaii needed to be explored. Being both Black and associated with the military are two factors that affected the experiences of the student participants in this study while attending schools in Hawaii.

Utilizing the counterstorytelling method, the following research questions were addressed: (a) What are the perceptions and experiences of African American military students in Hawaii regarding race, ethnic identity, and self-concept? and (b) How and to what extent do issues of transiency (e.g., coming to a new school, making friends, and experiencing new cultures) affect the experiences of African American military students in public schools, both academically and socially, in Hawaii?

### *Participants*

Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Hawaii at Manoa was secured for this study. To recruit schools for this study, I consulted the ethnicity reports from the Hawaii Department of Education, and then contacted schools that were located on or near a military installation and spoke with the principals to obtain access to the students. Letters were sent home to parents of students who had indicated that they were Black and/or Mixed with Black. Parents responded using a returned permission slip

form that their children returned to the principals by a specified date. There was a plethora of parental responses indicating the interest in this study. Data were collected from February 19, 2003 – April 26, 2003. There were 115 student participants from eight schools.

### **Collection of the Data**

The purpose of the following tools used to collect the data was to gather authentic experiences through conversations and reflections. Questionnaires gathered personal information, while the focus group interviews allowed students to discuss and share common experiences that they were having in schools.

#### *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire consists of a number of questions that the respondent has to answer in a set format that are either open-ended or closed-ended questions (Smedts, de Vries, & Rakhshandehroo, 2009). A questionnaire was distributed to each participant to gather information about his/her age, grade, personal perceptions about being an African American military student in Hawaii, and the military background of his or her parents (branch of service, number of years in Hawaii, other places he or she has lived, etc.). In addition, the questionnaire was returned to each student after the focus group interview sessions, and they were allowed to openly write and reflect on what had been discussed.

#### *Focus group interviews*

Focus groups develop a broad and deep understanding rather than a quantitative summary and are a highly effective methods for “listening” to participants’ responses where each discussion is highly influenced by those involved and the comments that surface from the sessions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Nineteen focus group interviews were conducted in eight military impacted schools. The students were separated into gender groups in hopes that the responses and experiences within the genders would raise similar themes, as well as provide higher or greater comfort levels. The students in each session were combined and ages ranged from eight to 11 years old (4th-6th grade elementary), 12-14 years old (7th-8th grade intermediate), and 14-18 years old (9th-12th grade high school). There were six to ten participants in each group. Participants were asked to individually respond to a particular set of questions asked one at a time. As a group, the participants were encouraged to discuss the same questions or topics that arose from individual responses. The sessions were video, and audio-taped in order to record accurate conversations and to observe body language. Each participant stated his or her name prior to speaking, took turns talking, and was asked to stay as close to the topic of the question asked; otherwise, transcribing would have been difficult when reconstructing the interview session.

*Focus group interview questions*

In order to capture the data to create the counterstory and reveal the dominant story which emphasizes that African American students in Hawaii have similar experiences regarding racism, mimicry and military transiency, the following four questions were examined: (a) What is your perception of schools in Hawaii compared to those on the mainland, are there similarities and/or differences? (b) Do you learn about your culture and other cultures in school? (c) Have you experienced racism in school or have you experienced any differences because your family is military? (d) Finish this statement: "Being an African American student in Hawaii means..." The data were recorded on video and audio tape and then later transcribed.

*The transformation of the data in the counterstory*

Three themes - racism, mimicry, and military transiency - were consistent and comparable within the participants' perspectives in the study which derived from the initial data collection from each of the participants. They were all experiencing the three themes consistently. This is another reason that writing the data as a counterstory was effective. The data from this study provides evidence of cultural conflicts occurring between local and African American students in Hawaii public schools within the realms of race and military affiliation.

The majority of the participants felt they had experienced racism in public school and were called a nigger or other racial slurs by teachers, students and administrators. These acts came from a variety of ethnicities including Hawaiian, part Hawaiian, Filipino, Samoan, White, and Asian. In addition, the students felt that being affiliated with the military heightened incidents towards them. This was reoccurring especially among the male participants. Most of the elementary and intermediate students had lived in three to five other states and/or countries, and most high school students had lived in five to ten other states and/or countries. Most of the students would be leaving the island in the next three to six months. They all felt that the hardest part of the transition was leaving old friends, making new friends, fitting in at their new school, and being accepted by their teachers. Nearly all of the students stated that they were ready to leave Hawaii because it was not what they thought it was going to be; they were shocked that they were often targets of fights due to military affiliation, and they felt that their culture did not exist in Hawaii.

**Analysis**

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experiences and was the method used to analyze the data. Interpreting stories and, more specifically, the content of them is the central component of narrative analysis. Josselson and Lieblich (1993) conclude, "The relationship between life and story can be characterized as interpretive. A story interprets experiences, it makes their meaning explicit" (p. 18). Narrative inquiry reconstructs people's life histories and stories. The focus group interview sessions were broken into gender groups. The students in each session were combined and ages ranged from eight to 11 years old (4th-6th grade elementary), 12-14 years old (7th-8th grade intermediate),

and 14-18 years old (9th-12th grade high school). There were six to ten participants in each group. Participants were asked to individually respond to a particular set of questions asked one at a time. As a group, the participants were encouraged to discuss the same questions or topics that arose from individual responses. The interviews were audio and visually recorded. The data was then evaluated and separated into reoccurring themes that included: racism in school with regard to the word nigger, lack of culture in the school curriculum, and the constant negative association with being both Black and military associated in Hawaii. The similar themes and the resemblance in the experiences of the participants led to the analysis design of revealing their narratives in a counterstorytelling. Moreover, since the questionnaires contained reflections that resembled accounts of the student's life stories while in Hawaii, I decided to title the counterstory as a memoir because it is a collaboration of stories reflecting the experiences that Black military students had in Hawaii public schools.

The counterstory is retold through one Black military family (the Wilkingtons) living in Hawaii. The shared narratives and reflections of the male participants in the study are depicted through William's memoirs, and the female participants' narratives and reflections are expressed through Marsha's memoirs. This exaggerated retelling builds a consensus, a common culture of shared understandings and a deeper, more vital reality of ethics for the participants that provided the data and for those who read the counterstory (Delgado, 1995).

### **A Composite Counterstory**

#### *Memoirs of African American military students in Hawaii public schools*

“Military Brat!” “Nigger!” “Dumb Nigger!” “Oreo!” “Ignorant!” “Chicken eater!” “Coco lips!” “Charcoal!” “Red bone!” “Pimp!” “Playa!” “Cotton Picker!” “Darkie!” “Blackey!” “Dirty!” “Chocolate Milk!” “Chocolate Ice-cream!” “Land Stealer!” “African Booty-Scratcher!” “Black African!” “Big Black lips!” “Monkey!” “Ape!” “Stupid Black boy!” “Weirdo!” “Black bitch!” “Black ho!” “Black heffa!” “*Popolo!*”

For a brief second, as William and Marsha Wilkington walked through the halls of their new school, they thought that they had landed in the southern part of the United States. They had heard most of these slurs before, and seen them in graffiti, in other schools they had attended on the mainland. When they were overseas, they had a break from the stereotypes and slurs, especially in Germany, Japan, Okinawa, and Spain. Now they were back in America. It was their first time in Hawaii, and the negative attitudes toward African Americans were alive once again. For the past 15 years, they had lived in four different countries and five different states. Mr. Wilkington, their father, was a Marine currently stationed at a base on the island of *Oahu*, and Mrs. Wilkington, their mother, was a stay-at-home mother, who volunteered in the school system. William, 17 years old and in the 12th grade, and Marsha, 15 years old and in the 9th grade, were about to get a new dose of racism while in the most culturally diverse state in America.

The family had heard many rumors about Hawaii. For example, they heard that the school system was not that good, the books were old and outdated, the buildings were dirty and dusty with red clay dirt, and fans blew in the classrooms while the teachers tried

to teach. There were very few African American teachers and principals in the schools, and the curriculum was said to be at least ten years behind the mainland curriculum. Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson were told to put their kids in private school if they could afford it. Hawaii's educational system had a bad reputation among military families transferring to the islands.

Although there were negative rumors about the schools, there were also good rumors about coming to Hawaii. The good rumors included phrases like: "aloha," "beautiful scenery and sunny weather," "beautiful water and friendly people," and "you will be in paradise." But no one warned this African American family about the stereotypes and slurs that were hurled at them from all directions, coming from all types of people varying in age, gender, social class, and ethnicity. The family was shocked as William and Marsha received the largest doses of racism in school. How could racism be so blatant in paradise?

### *William's memoir*

I was challenged the first day of school, not by my teachers academically, but by my peers socially. Being an African American male in Hawaii and a military dependent brought many conflicts. My friends and I (all Black) were walking down the hallway on my first day of school. A group of local guys started calling us names and saying things like: "You military brats make us sick, you think you can run this school?" "Why do you Black people look so mean? Are you gangsters? Do you want to fight us on our turf?" Man, I was mad, but I kept walking. I couldn't believe this. Was this aloha or the South? They didn't care about where we came from; they didn't want to know our names or anything else. But the local girls seemed to like us, and I think that's why the local guys got so upset. One girl asked me for my phone number and told me that she would love to get with a "brother." Other local girls winked at me and even told the local guys to shut up and leave my friends and me alone.

When I got to class, I told my teacher about the incident in the hallway. She looked at me like I was crazy. She was a Japanese lady and seemed a little nervous when I approached her. She told me not to worry and that the local boys were just kidding. I kept thinking, "No they weren't!" I told her that they said some really mean things to me. Luckily they had not called me a nigger because that would have set me off. She just told me to stop being so dramatic and it would be okay. Then she told me to take my seat.

I looked around the room and it was literally segregated. All the Black students were in one section, the White students were in another section, the Samoans and Asians each in separate sections, and so on. At first I thought nothing about it, but then as the year progressed, I realized that the teacher did this on purpose. When someone cracked a joke in class, she turned to the local kids. When someone said something rude she turned to

the Black kids. When she needed an answer quickly, she turned to the Asian and White kids, and when she was angry she looked at the Samoan and Black kids. This was crazy. On top of that, she decided that she just didn't like me. I did all of my work, turned in all of my assignments, because my parents stayed on me at home. I even raised my hand in class, but she refused to call on me or she treated my answers as less important than the other students and often embarrassed me in front of the class. For example, one week we were discussing slavery in class, so the next day I brought in a tape of old slave spirituals. I asked the teacher if I could play the tape because during slavery, the slaves had special codes in their songs or they used the songs for spiritual uplifting. In front of the class, she said no. She asked me why slaves would have anything happy to sing about, and she said that by playing the tape it would only depress the real meaning behind the lesson. I tried to explain, but she told me to sit down or leave if I continued to interrupt her class. I was angry, embarrassed, and mentally tired of trying to defend myself. I gave up and sat down.

The first quarter, for the first time in my life, I got a D in English. On the mainland I was an A-B Honor Roll Student. I went to her and complained, and she told me that I was too opinionated. She also told me that she had not received some of my assignments (in other words, she lost my work, because I kept my work in a binder, and I recorded my grades as I received them). I showed her the missed assignments, but she would not change my grade. My parents finally came to the school for a conference. Once she met my parents and realized that they were involved in my education, her attitude toward me began to change. In fact, that D went to a B – real quick! I just can't help but think that if my parents had not come up to the school or if I had not kept track of my grades, I would have failed English – like most of my other friends were doing. I'm not used to this and sometimes I feel like I'm graded on how much my teachers like me. I say how can they like me when they don't take the time to even get to know me?

Another problem in school came from issues about credits transferring, graduation requirements, and grading. Here I am in the 12th grade, and I have to take 9th Hawaiian Studies as a graduation requirement. When I started talking to my advisor and she told me that I had to take a ninth grade Hawaiian Studies class, I laughed. I thought she was kidding. I wanted to test out. "The rules are the rules," she said. "If you want to graduate, you have to take this class." Fine, I didn't want to, not because it was Hawaiian, but because I had so many other classes in history from the mainland and hoped that they would transfer. Besides, in the Hawaiian Studies class, all we learn about are the names of Hawaiians and what Captain Cook did. Then the teacher expects us to learn how to spell the words; it's like taking a foreign language. I thought we were going to learn

about Hawaii, and all we learn are names, dates, and facts. Where's the history? It sucks!

I came to the conclusion that my teachers do not care about me. They don't really want to know about my feelings or have any interest in my African American culture. The only people we talk about in school are Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks – as if they are the only two African Americans who did anything. As the weeks passed, more and more incidents of racism and racial slurs arose. The more I told the teachers, the more they swept it under the rug. It was like they were afraid to confront racism, and they especially didn't understand what it felt like when someone called a Black person a nigger. Three of my friends have been called names by their teachers, including nigger. Each of their teachers has told them that they are dumb or ignorant. The teachers are still teaching! I look around and wish for an African American teacher to talk to, but they are not here!

During the school year, I tried to avoid the problems with the local boys as much as I could. They really hate the military kids, and they even more hate the Black military kids. All of us base kids hang together, but when it comes down to fighting or racial incidents the conflicts between local vs. military always turns into local vs. Blacks. Then came football....

One day I was at football practice. I had been at the school for about a month, and a group of local kids surrounded me and started calling me a nigger. They were the same guys who made the comments the first day of school. They pushed and shoved me. I started cussing and swinging. Coach broke us up. I was hurt pretty bad, but no one was suspended. In fact, my parents came to the school and the principal would not meet with them. They finally spoke with him by phone, and he made a lot of excuses. I'm sick and tired of this place. When my time is up I will never return to Hawaii because I feel like my culture does not exist here.

If I could divide my emotions into percentages, my feelings about being an African American military student in Hawaii would probably look something like: 25 percent of the time I feel lonely, and 15 percent of the time I feel isolated in the classrooms because I am either the only African American in the class or one of two or three. Ten percent of the time I feel weird, freaky, or different, and 20 percent of the time I stand out because I'm Black and people often stare at me. Ten percent of the time it is hard and horrible at school dealing with these issues, and 5 percent of the time I get no respect with regard to how the teachers treat me in class. Fifteen percent of the time I don't feel safe at school, and I feel targeted because I'm Black and military, and often the locals and Samoan kids harass me.

I feel like an endangered species because, with the exception of the military bases, I rarely see other African American males in Hawaii. Outside of the relationships that I've formed with other athletes (Blacks and others) on the team, I have limited association with other teens because I think people are afraid of me. During football, it's different because they see me as an equal, or someone who has something in common with them. But just going to school and sitting in class, some of the students here don't want to know me. Regardless of my feelings and experiences, I am proud to be an African American male student in Hawaii or anywhere else I may live because if I lose my pride, what else will I have to keep me going and making it in life?

Being an African American male and a military dependent student in Hawaii means HELL! It often means total isolation, no respect from other ethnicities, and constant stares from people. Although I must admit that the girls love us here, their parents and the local guys would rather see us leave. This has been the biggest challenge in my life, and I know that I have to work on my patience and endurance while I'm here in order to be a stronger Black man and survive.

#### *Marsha's memoir*

All we talk about in school is pretty much the same stuff: math, science, and we learn about Hawaii because a Hawaiian teacher comes in once a week. Our books are pretty old, my math book is falling apart, but I still like math the best. My teacher is boring and she expects us to sit still all day. It's hard because I like to talk and I get in trouble a lot. So far this year the thing that has upset me the most is the fact that we did not celebrate Black History Month. I mean, it wasn't acknowledged in any of my classes. I asked my teacher why, but she said nothing. Then I asked the principal, and she said, "Our school just doesn't do that." WHY NOT?! It's a month, and we celebrate other holidays and talk about a lot of White and Hawaiian people. I wish we could talk about other people too. I was determined to do something, so I asked the principal if my friends and I could put up posters of famous African Americans and display them along with the things that they had done in the past. She did allow this. The pictures were up a total of two days before someone defaced the majority of them and ripped down the rest. No one was ever disciplined for doing this, but this was emotionally devastating to me and the other African American students.

Why don't they want to know about our history? Sometimes kids ask me about slavery, especially when it is briefly mentioned in class. They ask why the slaves didn't fight back, and I tell them that they did, but the textbooks only teach one version of the story. I tell them that slaves struggled and that Black people have always had to fight, just like Martin

Luther King, and Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers, and thousands of others. Maybe if we talked about Black people in our classes, and even other cultures, other than just what's in the textbooks, then other students, including myself, would understand more about the different cultures in the world. I feel like my teachers don't like me or understand my culture because it is not acknowledged in the lessons that they teach. I wish they would take the chance to learn about my culture instead of sending me to the office for talking.

I know my brother William has his issues with the conflicts with the local guys and his grades. I have similar issues, but most of mine focus around who I am as far as being a Black female. I have conflicts with all the girls, including the African Americans. Although most of my friends are Black, they are sometimes jealous of me too. It's hard to explain.

I feel weird. Freaky, yeah, freaky, that's how I feel, like everyone is looking at me. People often stare at me or ask questions about my hair, skin color, and race. I hate that. I love wearing braids, but I get so many questions, it gets on my nerves. My mom and I were at a store, and this Japanese lady was looking at us and asking us about our hair and commenting on our smooth, dark skin. I guess they have never seen a Black girl or braids. I cry a lot because I'm dark skinned and I feel like some of these kids don't like me or they are scared of me. I know I'm beautiful, and maybe that's what makes them so mad.

I have had three major issues about being a Black female that really stand out for me. The first one is with the local girls. First of all, when I say "local," I mean that they are usually a mix of everything (Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino, Latino, etc.). Some even have some African American in them, but I had several of them tell me that they don't claim the African American blood. One girl even told me that her parents told her not to claim the African American blood because being Black is not a good thing. Some other girls told me that when they were growing up, their parents told them to stay out of the sun so that they would not get Black like the "Popolo" (Black people). Being dark-skinned is not cool in Hawaii.

Anyway, the local girls love our Black men, and that's fine, but for some reason they stab us [Black females] in the back once they got them. It's like they use us to get close to our men, and then once they have them, they kick us to the curb. I have had so many local girls comment on my clothes and hair, and then they come to school dressed the same way. They even get the braids and corn-rolls. They listen to our music, try to dance like us, and even want to be a part of our step team (which is mostly Black). This is all fine and dandy, but the moment we get into a disagreement, I suddenly turn into a "Black nigger" or a "Black bitch."

Also, the moment they get what they want (a Black guy), and then I am no longer their friend. I even had one girl tell me that I might try to steal her man. Not all of them are like this, but this has happened to me too many times since I've been here.

The second incident that stands out is one with the Asian girls, including my Asian teachers. I am convinced that they are scared of me because I am a Black woman. My Asian teachers have told me that I am loud and I voice my opinion too freely. Then came the "email incident." I had a group of Asian girls (I know that they were Asian because they told me that they were via email, they just didn't give their names), who emailed me and called me a Black, loud, aggressive, nigger and bitch! I can't prove who it is, but I know who they are because during our English class I did a speech on being a Black Woman, and they got mad! Regardless, the email was horrifying. My parents reported the incident to the school; as of today nothing has been done about it.

Finally, as a Black female I have found out that the darker you are, the less popular you are with the local students. First of all, among my Black friends we talk about this all the time. Of course, the Black guys want the light girls because if they are not dating the local girls, then they are dating the light-skinned Black girls. Most of my light-skinned friends disagree with me on this one, but it's a fact. So when we disagree among ourselves, it is usually over the Black men. Black men have a lot of control over "who's dating who" relationships in our school. However, when it comes to treatment from our teachers or issues of racism, we are all Black, regardless of our skin tones. All of my African American friends have been called a nigger at least once since they came to Hawaii. All of them have experienced negative stereotyping, and all of them have been associated with the military, even the ones who are not military!

For some reason when I am insulted in school, I am either called a "Black ho" or "bitch," and then I am accused of stealing their land. I can't win being Black and military. I do have some Black friends who are not military, but it is hard for the locals to separate African Americans from the military because the majority of us are military dependents. The first day of school my teacher asked if my dad was in the military, and when I said, "Yes," she made a funny face, and then said, "Of course he is." What is that suppose to mean?" It would be nice to talk an adult at school who can relate to me as an African American.

All of the teachers at my school are White, Asian, and local. The principal is local too, but I do know some African American students who live in my neighborhood who go to different schools that have African American principals and teachers. They say that the African American principals and teachers are harder on them than on the other ethnic groups at the school,

they expect more from them, and that they don't get special treatment. One thing for certain, though: they feel pride in having an African American principal in charge at their school and African American teachers as role models in the classrooms because they can go to them and discuss racism and being called a nigger. Often when they report the incidents to the African American teachers and principals, the students who were calling the names are reprimanded.

Hawaii is the most different place that I have ever lived. Racism is so shocking here, and I really wasn't expecting it. I have to say that being an African American and living in Hawaii means that as a Black woman I feel that I'm invisible, but yet I'm in a fishbowl, isolated, but my presence invades people's sense of personal comfort and how they feel. It means that my skin, hair, and body are seen second, after my Blackness. The darker you are, the harder it will be to make friends, get along with your teachers, and be popular at school. I feel lonely, but I have friends. I feel freaky, but I look around and the other girls have the same hairstyles, listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, and have the same man that I want to get with, but in a split second they are ready to reject me for who I am. I believe that you have to be prepared wherever you end up as a military transfer student, but really be prepared in Hawaii because the racism comes from all ethnic groups, not just White. On top of that, I am proud I am a Black woman. I can't and don't want to change that. I just have to deal with it more here in Hawaii.

William and Marsha's first impressions of Hawaii were that it was paradise. They remember going to the Pali Lookout on a windy Sunday afternoon; the sky was blue and slightly overcast, and the clouds hovered about the mountaintops. When they looked over the great wall, they saw valleys, towns, and the beautiful ocean off the outlook. Palm trees were blowing gently in the wind, and flowers that had become unattached from their limbs were floating in the wind and bringing a sweet smell to the air. In the distance cars, trucks, and other vehicles that looked as small as Match Box imitations were traveling in a hundred directions. Signs and other landmarks were hardly noticeable. In front of them was the endless ocean, and the waves were crashing against the shore as the whiteness of the currents of each wave faded to blue in the sand. To the left, the mountains stood tall and proud, and the feeling of "*aloha*" embraced each ridge and peak. Hawaii looked so perfect, so unbreakable. There was a special presence here - a presence of peace, nature, and God because no other place could be this perfect. But when William and Marsha got to school, they began to realize just how difficult it was to be an African American military dependent. The countless stereotypes that haunted them and their ancestors were hidden among the "*aloha*." Pleasant breezes and sunshine turned into harsh hurling of racial slurs from a society not willing to discuss the cultures and diversity that make the islands so unique.

William and Marsha found themselves at the bottom of a melting pot full of cultures, genders, and ethnicities. From the outside of the pot, it appeared that everyone was alike since they had similar stories of oppression. The separate colors of white, tan,

red, black, and yellow were seen in so many faces, yet at the last minute, the colors combined, except for black, which settled at the bottom of the pot. The colors in the pot became confused as cultures began to fade into one another, still not acknowledging African Americans. Racism began to harden and collect on the spoon that mixed the pot's contents. Pretty soon the melting pot became a layered pot instead. William and Marsha found that in this particular melting pot, called Hawaii, most of the colors go their separate ways, form their own opinions, and leave Black on the bottom.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

As seen in the counterstory, which was a composite of all the narratives of the participants, African Americans have a challenging time assimilating into the local Hawaiian culture (Blair, 1998; Jackson, 2001; Lee, 1948; Takara, 2002). In Hawaii peoples' race defines who they are, where they live, and how others view them in the local community. Blair points out those racial and ethnic preferences "profoundly influence island society." He states, "While many – perhaps most – Hawaii residents would freely acknowledge their 'preference' for people like themselves, few would call themselves prejudiced" (p. 175). Hawaii residents do not talk openly or directly about race relations; but African Americans are aware of and expect racism to occur (Blair; Jackson; Takara, 1977; Tatum, 1997). Blair points out that the local culture has a local identity, "a side that unites some while it keeps others out" (p. 59). The lack of cultural knowledge from both local and African-Americans in Hawaii about one another heightens cultural conflicts between the two ethnic groups. An analysis using a CRT lens shows the harm and internal damage of racial insults to minority children (Delgado, 1995). The data presented in the counterstory revealed that all of the student participants had experienced racism in a Hawaii school through negative stereotyping from their teachers and other students. It can be argued that the students experienced discrimination based on the military association, however it is evident in the vast array of racial epithets presented at the beginning of the counterstory that race was the primary target of the discriminatory acts. The African American students share common realities and through the counterstory, shared meanings and experiences were revealed. Delgado explained that, "stories create their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings and meanings" (p. 64), thus the power of presenting this data in a counterstory. The shared narratives became dominant when presented as exaggerated and three common themes arose from the data: racism, mimicry, and military transitions.

#### *Theme 1: Encounters with racism in Hawaii public schools*

Data revealed that most of the participants had experienced racism in school through negative stereotyping from their teachers and other students. During informal sessions with local principals and individual interviews with the three local teachers, they explained that the darker a person is in Hawaii, the harder it is for him or her to "fit in." Participants often referred to name-calling and stereotyping as forms of racism. The participants who were the recipients of these epithets felt that the words were attacks on their race. Some said they laughed as the names were spoken, but not in response to the harsher names like Nigger, Cotton Picker, Black Ho, Black Bitch, and *Popolo* (a

Hawaiian term for dark berry) because they felt these words were the most offensive. The students stated that although the slurs were used during arguments, written on walls as graffiti, or used in more friendly situations, they still were offended. Moreover, all of the students reported that they were called names involving racial slurs, and all of them had been called a “nigger” at one point or another. Principals, parents, and teachers in the study acknowledged that the use of the word *nigger* was common and causing many conflicts among the local and African American students. Critical race theory emphasizes the harm and internal damage of racial insults to minority children (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

African American students stated that they were victims of racist acts because they were Black. They believed that their race was the primary factor for the negative experiences that they were having. Critical Race Theory scholars would concur, as they see race as the predominant factor in discrimination and oppression for these youth (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is evident in Hawaii that African Americans are considered socially inferior due to historical implications of racism and colonialism. Local students used racial slurs and epithets as well as colonized perceptions to objectify African American students in school. The data from this study suggested that race was the primary factor in the incidents involving most of the student participants in which they were objectified as “Other.”

### *Theme 2: Mimicry*

The negative stereotypes and racial slurs that have impacted the experiences of the study participants in Hawaii are derived from Westernized perceptions of Blacks on the mainland. As Jackson (2001) explains, “The American way was felt to be the best way for Hawaii in 1900. Over time the local culture adopted and imitated many of the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, without necessarily internalizing them” (p. 73) [i.e., local identity and speech]. This is known as mimicry (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998) and can be applied to the perception and treatment of African Americans in Hawaii. Mimicry has two components: (a) ambivalence, in which a person has conflicting emotions or thoughts about a person, object, or idea; and (b) mockery, which entails a deliberate act of ridicule toward the colonizer. Ashcroft et al. explains that ambivalence describes an attraction and repulsion between the relationships of the colonizer (military) and colonized. He adds, “The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer” (p. 12). Many of the same people who used these styles to negatively stereotype African Americans were the very ones mimicking them, demonstrating ambivalence to African Americans and their culture. They wore hip hop clothing, listened to “Black music,” wore their hair in braids, and some addressed each other as “*nigga*.” Several African American boys dated local girls who had pursued them. According to Bhabha (1970), mimicry represents an ironic compromise. The local students were imitating the African American students, while constructing them as “other” at the same time. They were like the African Americans, but not like them. Although appropriating some African American styles and behaviors, identities remained distinct. Bhabha’s argument is that “colonial discourse is compelled to be ambivalent because it never really wants colonial subjects to be exact replicas of the colonizers – this would be too threatening” (p. 13).

### *Theme 3: Military affiliation*

The teacher participants interviewed emphasized that they do not like military transitions that occurred during the school year. The majority of the parent participants interviewed stressed that it is difficult getting their children settled in at a new school because there is a lack of assistance with the transitions, records often arrive late or are lost, and many of the school personnel cannot answer their questions or address their concerns. Teachers explained that transitions interrupt instruction, students need an adjustment period when arriving to a new school, and it is hard for most military students in both the academic and social domains. Parents, teachers, and principals explained how difficult it is for local teachers to deal with military parents and students in general because parents have preconceived notions about the Hawaii school system. The teachers and principals explained that some parents could be critical and defensive when they come to enroll their children in the new school. High school participants expressed concerns about credits transferring and graduation requirements. Several stated that they were 12th graders and had to take 9th grade Hawaiian history as a graduation requirement. They wanted to test out or become exempt; however, taking Hawaiian history in Hawaii is mandatory. This issue often brought conflicts because parents felt that by 12th grade their child had satisfied history requirements. The administrators explained that each individual school decides if a 12th grade student transitioning in can become exempt or test out of the history requirement. Over half of the high school participants were in the 12th grade 11 had just transferred to their school, and all of them were required to take Hawaiian history with 9th grade students. At one site, two students stated that their teacher told them, "Get the grade to pass and get out, you're only here to get the credit anyway." Issues surrounding military transitions for students were not being addressed at five of the participating sites. However, at three of the sites, plans were in place to implement a transition program for all incoming students for the 2003-2004 school year.

### **Final Reflections**

This study is not exposing racism in Hawaii because it is evident that it exists everywhere. What it does do is give voice to African American students living and going to school in Hawaii while providing insight into the nature and impact of racism. This study will give other researchers the motivation to conduct additional investigations about student experiences in the Hawaii school system and can serve as a resource for educators and researchers who want to learn more about the perceptions and experiences of African American military students in Hawaii. In addition, the data can open up new venues for researchers, schools, and communities with regard to addressing cultural differences and enhancing multiculturalism. The findings of this research can also contribute to teacher education and professional development for in-service teachers in Hawaii.

This study has addressed many concerns and issues regarding African American military students in Hawaii. It has raised many questions, brought to light some answers and, above all, it allowed the memoir of African Americans who are involved in the public school system to be heard through a counterstory. "The topic one chooses to

research, the kind of research one chooses to do, how one interprets the data collected, and even the conclusion to which one comes” (Berry, 2002, p. 145). My personal memoirs that captured my experiences and intersecting roles of identity in Hawaii were the foundation for this study and are the link to future research endeavors.

When I arrived in Hawaii, I was on top of the world - above the rainbows that filled the perfect sky. As I journeyed through this study, I found that society had placed my culture somewhere under the rainbow. I searched for African American history and its proper place in the islands. Through the experiences of the African Americans in this study, I have managed to see positive potential for us here. We cannot allow society to define who we are. We must hold true to our cultural identity and educate others about who we are, where we came from, and what we believe. Over the past few years, I have gradually moved into the rainbow, and I believe that hearing the voices of the African American students in this study was cause for my gradual movement. I have decided that only I can define who I am; others may try, but the definition is in my cultural identities: African American, military dependent, female, educator, mother, and researcher.

### References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1998). *Key concepts in post colonial studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Bell, D. A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well*. New York: Perseus Book Group.
- Berry, R. Q. (2002). *Voices of African American male students: A portrait of successful middle school mathematics students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Bhabha, H. (1970). *Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Blair, C. (1998). *Money, color and sex in Hawaii politics*. Honolulu, HI: Mutual.
- Bogdan, S. K., & Biklen, R. C. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Brown, K. (1993). African American immersion schools: Paradoxes of race and public education. In R. Delgado (Ed.), *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (pp. 73-387). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: The New York University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2005). *The role of critical race theory in understanding race, crime and justice issues*. Paper presented at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, New York.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New York Press.
- Jackson, M. M. (2001). *And they came: A brief history and annotated bibliography of Blacks in Hawaii*. Durham, NC: Four-G.

- Josselson, R., & Lieblich, A. (Eds.). (1993). *The narrative study of lives* (Vol. 1). London: Sage.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp.17-36). New York: Routledge.
- Lee, L. (1948). A brief analysis of the role and status of the Negro in the Hawaiian community. *American Sociological Review*, 13, 419-437.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2002). *Culture difference and power*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smedts, H. P., de Vries, J. H., & Rakhshandehroo, M. (February, 2009). *What is a questionnaire?* Retrieved October 29, 2009, from [www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com)
- Takara, K. (1977). Who is the Black woman in Hawaii? In N. F. Young & J. R. Parrish (Eds.), *Montage: An ethnic history of women in Hawaii*. Honolulu, HI: General Assistance Center for the Pacific.
- Takara, K. W. (March, 2002). *African Americans in Hawaii: The challenge to deconstruct and re-construct identity*. Paper presented at the Ethnic Studies Forum, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Perseus Books Group.
- Taylor, E., Gillborn, D., & Ladson-Billings, G. (Eds.). (2009). *Foundations of critical race theory in education*. New York: Routledge.
- West, C. (2001). *Race matters*. New York: Random House.
- Williams, P. J. (1998). *Seeing a colorblind future*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 8, 69–91.
- Zuwiyya, N. (2000). *Definition of a memoir*. Retrieved April 12, 2009, from <http://inkspell.homestead.com/memoir.htm>

### Author Note

Dr. Kimetta R. Hairston is an Assistant Professor of Education at the Penn State University in Harrisburg. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii at Manoa; with a focus on qualitative research design, multicultural education, and diversity and disability studies. In addition to her professorship, she conducts Cultural Awareness and Diversity Training for various organizations across the states of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Hawaii. Correspondences regarding this article can be addressed to: Kimetta R. Hairston, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education, Penn State University – Harrisburg, 777 West Turnpike Way, Middletown, PA 17057-4898. Phone: 717-948-6385; Fax: 717-948-6064; E-mail: [krh19@psu.edu](mailto:krh19@psu.edu).

Copyright 2010: Kimetta R. Hairston and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

Hairston, K. R. (2010). A composite counterstorytelling: Memoirs of African American military students in Hawaii public schools. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(4), 783-801. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-4/hairston.pdf>